

The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, June 19, 2016. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland WA
Nigel Taber-Hamilton Isaiah 65:1-9, Psalm 22:18-27, Galatians 3:23-29, Luke 8:26-39

We're so used to hearing biblical language, so familiar with biblical stories, that it's easy to miss what's going on. If you lived in an Empire, where the major military unit was....a Legion...well, the gospel story of Jesus casting out the demon named "Legion" into a heard of pigs might take on a different hue! Today, the demon's name would be....what?..... "Congress!!"

What's going on today in those readings? 'Business as usual:' we're not paying attention! Life is going on in those readings, but then, all of a sudden, up pops God – up pops Jesus – and in both Isaiah and Luke, God says exactly the same thing: "I'm here - are you listening?"

The answer is, of course, "no" – Isaiah's community isn't listening – they're ignoring where they need to look for the foundation of their lives, they're not open to God's help, in fact quite the opposite: they're making bad choices, they're screwing up their future because – as Isaiah's channeling of God points out – they're stuck in a reality without God. Their self-centered lives were simply missing what God's loving-kindness is all about. The possibility and the promise are still there – who will see it? Who will embrace it?

Nor are those folk who live on the south-eastern side of the Sea of Galilee – The "Gerasenes" – listening for God's voice. Ironically, only the demons actually listen, though they definitely don't want to do what Jesus commands. The Gerasenes weren't willing to hear about the power of God to transform lives, to make whole that which is broken, to heal that which is wounded. Only in Jesus' actions that heal the broken one, actions that most compellingly proclaim the "*I'm here*" of God do the Gerasenes finally get it. That "getting it" impels them to run – yes, run, in all of the Middle East's heat – to share the news of one who can make whole the brokenness of life.

Rather like Isaiah in the Old Testament reading, in the letter to the Galatians it's Paul who's the surrogate voice which speaks on behalf of God. It seems that while the Galatians initially listened to Paul, almost as soon as he left them for another mission start-up, they were seduced by another group – probably from Jerusalem – who told them that to be "real" followers of Jesus, they had to adopt a whole series of practices that – in Paul's mind – simply acted as barriers to a relationship with God rather than as vehicles into that relationship.

The main practice, it seems, was male circumcision. In other words, these "seducers" were focusing on the men in the Galatian community. Patriarchalism rears its head again!

In a very profound sense, we should be grateful to these interlopers because they provoke from Paul a vision of community that's at the very center of everything that he believes and says in any authentic letter about Jesus and his followers – it's a blueprint for what it means to be a Christian and to live in community. That center is this: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you (and, we should add, "all of us, too") are one in Christ Jesus." If you never read another word of Paul, read – and learn – these few words from Galatians 3:27-28

“No longer Jew or Greek...” In our time all the contemporary forms of mass communication – TV, Cable, Internet, Newsprint – you name it! – are being manipulated, especially by some in our political class. The individuals and the media communications are convulsed over what it means to be an American. A politician in England is assassinated, and all politics instantly stops in horror. 49 are assassinated in Orlando, and within minutes there are “I told you so” claims, self-congratulation, attacks on others, and the continued attempts at the hijacking of civilized and relevant political debate by extremists. These individuals, and those who allow what they say to be communicated unchecked, are functioning like a Fifth Column among us, subverting our democracy and our identity as people who care. Parts of our national identity are like that man possessed among the tombs – we allow ourselves to be convulsed by the demons of our worse nature, not the angels of our better one - those subtle shoulder-mounted voices that whisper in our ears and say “what did you expect? You can’t trust *them!* They’re not like us, they’re tainted, not normal, infected; you have to get rid of them.” This is always the way that who aren’t in power get treated, who aren’t part of the ruling elite, who aren’t part of something that holds onto control with a firm grip and feeds us falsehoods. We are not, today, hearing the sonorous language of “unite” and “build together,” we’re hearing the brittle, destructive language of “Divide and Conquer.” The truth, though, is this: there is no “us” and “them,” there’s only “us” and “us.” So when we hear that divisive language in the face of threats made to some of us, the truth is that all of us are being threatened. When any one of us is wounded, we can’t listen to those voices that tell us that we’re okay because we’re not like them: we are all, in some way, wounded. When any one is killed, it not only kills part of each of us, it threatens all of us – it threatens all of us and this place, this nation, this democracy that we all hold dear. The language of division is fundamentally un-American, and un-Christian; *for the God of Paul and Jesus says this: there is no longer American or Iranian, or Russian, or North Korean, for we are all one in God.*

And then Paul says this: “No longer slave or free.” That same evil, subtle shoulder-mounted voice also whispers to us about an “American Dream” that’s no longer within reach for most Americans. This is the voice that tries to tell the 99-plus percent of us that “we’ve never had it so good,” when, in fact, a significant number of Americans have rarely ever had it so bad.

The entire economic system of the Roman Empire – and any Empire, including the American one – is dependent on the exploitation of those at the bottom of the socio-economic scale. What Paul said then was a direct assault on the Empire’s most valued commodity – free or almost free labor – a minimum “wage” that wasn’t then and isn’t now a living wage; a system that guaranteed “the good life” for the few, and continued struggle, pain, anguish, and loss – economic slavery – for the many, a system where one family controls more wealth than 167 Million Americans at the bottom of the pile – those Psalm 22 identifies: the poor. The language of the so-called “Free Market” is fundamentally un-American and un-Christian; while we continue to allow this level of exploitation we are preventing the inauguration of that New Community of Christ in which fairness, equity, and a respect are the hallmarks of our national, our religious, and our personal identity. *For the God of Paul and Jesus says this: there is no longer economic slavery or obscene return on investment; for we are all one in God.*

And the last binary is perhaps the most telling: “No longer male and female.” The “and” and not

an “or” is because Paul wants us to remember Genesis 3. We do remember Genesis 3, of course. But Patriarchal culture – that’s held the reins ever since the destruction of an agrarian, egalitarian society seven millennia ago by the male-warriors of the new city-states – Patriarchal culture subverts the Genesis’ intent, and reminds us *only* of the second part, twisting its basic meaning to claim that Woman is “opposite,” is “less than” is “created from,” rather than the first part and most important part, that it’s “Male AND Female,” that the new human creation should be seen in its two parts as *complementary equals* before God.

Genesis 3 is, in one passage, the story of Complementarianism, of egalitarianism, overthrown by domination and patriarchy! Part of humanity is suddenly enslaved in a few sentences. The metaphor of “Male AND female” in Genesis is the supreme example and proclamation of what it God-created humanity is intended to do: live in harmony. The language of sexism, and racism, and every other “-ism” is fundamentally un-American, and un-Christian The God of Paul and of Jesus says this: there is no longer male or female, gay or straight, white or black or yellow or brown – that the most basic example of the enslavement and subversion of the good of creation is being overthrown in Christ Jesus; that it is exactly because of our joyful diversity that we are all one in God.

In Orlando the funerals are beginning. The Westboro Baptist Church extremists plan to picket. Thousands have signed up to act as a united human buffer between them and the funerals. Across our nation, public figures who have, in the past, spoken out against human rights for the GLBTQ community are standing up and saying “I was wrong.” Perhaps it takes a moment like this for some folk finally to notice the voice of God, saying “I’m here, are you listening?”

Maybe it is a time when the newness of God is breaking into the every-day, when the Spirit-driven winds of change are finally being felt and responded to. For us, as Christians, though, it’s surely a time to embrace words from a 2,000-year-old letter as more than just words on a page, and to say *and to act* with understanding and commitment in proclaiming the power of God to transform lives, to make whole that which is broken, to heal that which is wounded in all of our lives, to transform and to make new, because “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female; for we are all one in Christ Jesus.”