

C Lectionary 12 6.23.19

1 Kings 19:1-15a; Luke 8:26-39

Focus Statement: Jesus casts out fear.

Welcome to the time after Pentecost. Also known as ordinary time or “the long green season.” I hope you like this green stole, because I’ll be wearing it until December. To do some stage setting, the church year is divided up into two sections. Advent through Pentecost, essentially the birth of Jesus through the coming of the Holy Spirit, is known as the Life of Christ. This is when we learn about who Jesus is, what he means, and how he changes the world and us. The second section, this so called “ordinary time”—which fun fact, is called “ordinary time” not because the Sundays are ordinary, but because the weeks are numbered or “ordered” – this “ordinary time” is what is known as the Life of the Church. The point of the readings in this time of the year is for us to think about, ok, now that we know who Jesus is and what Jesus did, how then do we as a church live in response to that gift? So we reread about Jesus’ ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing, reflecting on how we hear them differently in the light of Christ’s resurrection, now that we are resurrection people.

But before we get to talking about our Gospel reading for this morning, I want to make one more quick jump for one more fun fact: during Ordinary Time the lectionary gives us a choice on Old Testament readings. We can either follow what’s called the “thematic track” where the readings are chosen to echo the themes of the Gospel, or we can follow the “semicontinuous track” where the readings, appropriately, give us a more or less continuous narrative. During Year C, the semicontinuous track takes us through the prophets. And since I love the prophets and we don’t get to spend much time with them, I

thought we'd go that route for a change. So I want to encourage you to pay attention to the Old Testament readings because while I probably won't mention it every Sunday, we will occasionally pop in and see what the prophets are up to. An important thing to remember about the prophets is that prophets and prophecy are not the same thing. The prophets in the Old Testament were not fortune-tellers, they were truth-tellers. The role of the prophet was to declare the message of God. Another thing to remember about the prophets is that they were pretty ordinary people. Elijah is one of the most famous prophets in the Bible, he is one of the people who shows up with Jesus during his transfiguration, he is the spiritual predecessor of John the Baptist. And in our story this morning, he was portrayed as tired, scared, and maybe a bit hangry. Now, in fairness, and to set us in the context of the story, Elijah's life was more than a little stressful at the moment. He'd just finished a big showdown with the followers of the false god Baal and as a result he was now on the run from Queen Jezebel. But in Beer-sheba he was outside of Jezebel's land and therefore safe from her threats. Yet, the text shows us Elijah still didn't feel safe and asked the Lord "that he might die." And I love God's response to Elijah's request. First, God didn't do anything until Elijah falls asleep. Then, God sent an angel to wake him up and instruct him to eat a snack which had been prepared for him. There's a meme that makes the rounds on the internet sometimes about this story that always makes me laugh that reads: "This is your gentle reminder that one time in the Bible Elijah was like "God, I'm so mad! I want to die!" so God said "Here's some food. Why don't you have a nap?" So Elijah slept, ate, & decided things weren't so bad. Never underestimate the spiritual power of a nap & a snack."

But that's not all God did for Elijah. After the whole snack/nap scenario, God showed Godself to Elijah. And this too is one of my favorite parts of scripture because of the power of the imagery. "God said to Elijah, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces... but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire was"—and this next part actually depends on which translation you read because Hebrew's a tricky language to translate—"after the fire was a sound of sheer silence," or "a sound of fine silence," or "a gentle whisper," or "a still small voice." However it is translated, that is where the Lord was. "When Elijah heard THAT, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave."

What I love about this passage is the unexpectedness of God. God gave Elijah all these huge, loud, powerful things, winds, earthquakes, fires, all things, by the way, which are symbols of the presence of God, remember two weeks ago Pentecost with the mighty wind and the tongues of fire, but God wasn't in those things. Rather, God was in the sheer silence, the still small voice. This passage reminds me that, yes, God can do flashy. "Blood, and fire, and smoky mist," and all that jazz. But God is not constrained to flashy. God doesn't have to scare Elijah to make God's presence known. God is also present in silence, in quiet, in persistence, in presence, and in the simplest of cures that is a long nap and a good snack.

Flash forward to our Gospel reading, and we've got another story about fear. Jesus and his disciples crossed the Sea of Galilee and entered the region of the Gerasenes. And the first person who met them was a man who had demons. And not just some demons, this guy had a legion of demons. And legion is a very specific word choice here, because a legion is a Roman fighting force of about six-thousand soldiers. So Luke is working in a bit of a social and political angle into this text here. Yes this is a story about Jesus having power over demons, but also the demons have the same name as Roman fighters so...

So the man with the demons met Jesus on the shore. And the demons, as demons do, immediately recognized Jesus, "What have you to do with me Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" The demons begged Jesus not to cast them out into the abyss and Jesus, Doug Martens pointed this out to me in Bible study and I think it's fascinating, Jesus showed the demons mercy by permitting them to go into a herd of pigs instead. But once the demons entered the pigs, the pigs immediately "rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned." This, as theologian R. Alan Culpepper points out, demonstrates for us that "when it gets its way, evil is always destructive and ultimately self-destructive... the demons that wanted most to avoid being sent into the abyss have been drowned in the lake."<sup>i</sup>

Once this happened, chaos ensued. The swineherders ran to tell the townspeople about what had happened, and the townspeople came to see what had happened, and there they found "the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. Those who had seen it told" the towns people what

had happened, and they “asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear.” This seems like such an interesting and odd response to this whole scene. In a story with demons and drowning pigs, the thing that freaked the townspeople out was the sight of their local village crazy guy sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed, quiet, and in his right mind. So much so that rather than rejoicing that their community member had been healed, they instead asked Jesus to leave.

There’s a million different directions we could go with this, a million interesting questions we could ask. But two things really caught my attention in this text this week. The first is a question, what does this story tell us about our ability to allow people to change? Do we allow space for others to be transformed by Jesus, or like the townspeople, can we see only the man with demons, not the man as he now is? And the second is a sadness for the townspeople, and what they end up missing because of the fear they felt at this scene. Jesus healed a man of demons, and instead of rejoicing, instead of bringing Jesus into their town to see what other miracles he might perform, they asked Jesus if maybe he could just move along. Tombs represent places of desolation and death, and in some ways it seems like the man with the demons got out of the tomb just in time for the townspeople to metaphorically move themselves into it. Fear is a powerful force, and like evil it is both destructive and self-destructive. The townspeople’s fear first punished the man with the demons, keeping him on the outskirts of society. And now it was punishing them without their even realizing it, causing them to push away Jesus, the one who would ultimately set them free from fear and death.

But here's where I found the real good news in this story this week. Not for the man with the demons. Not that not having demons anymore isn't great but it's both a) sort of low-hanging theological fruit and b) demons are hard to relate to. The good news I found this week was for the townspeople themselves. Because here they were, so wrapped up in their own fear that they asked Jesus to leave. And Jesus obliged their request, but not completely. See, the man who had been set free of demons wanted to come with Jesus, but Jesus told him to stay behind, telling him "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.' So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him." Jesus couldn't cast out the townspeople's fear himself, so he left the man formerly known as Legion behind to do it for him. To be a living example for this community of the power of Jesus and his healing. So that slowly, they may come to get over their fear and through the power of relationship, of getting to know Legion not as Legion but as Frank or Joe or whoever he was now, to have their eyes opened and their minds expanded. Jesus did not leave them in their fear; he left them with a continued message of comfort and the power of God to transform.

Dear friends in Christ, that, I think, is the good news of both of these stories. That God does not leave us in our fear, but that God comes to cast out our fear. And as many ways as we have to fear, God has even more ways to cast it out. From earthquakes and violent winds, to sheer silence and still small voices, to snacks and naps, from casting out demons to the persistence of relationship, God does not leave us in fear. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," *New Interpreters Bible Commentary, Vol. IX* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 1995).