



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick

2nd Sunday After Pentecost, June 24, 2019

Sermon Title: "Never Alone"

Texts: Luke 8:26-39, Psalm 22:19-28

It wasn't until the old pastor died that people learned the truth. That got your attention didn't it?

He'd been a long time in a small parish out in the Plains states. Faithfully serving, but if the truth be told his preaching wasn't much to speak of, a fair amount of the time. It wasn't until he died that a woman told the truth, a truth that had been hard to tell. That every week on one or more nights the pastor had been at her house in the middle of the night, staying even until the early dawn, driving home to rub the sleep from his eyes and head off to the church. And it's not what you think.

Every time she called he came out to the farm. Because her husband was out of control and she needed the pastor, and he needed the pastor- to come and walk him through the night terrors.

Every time it looked like he might get better, a new round began.

Some say it was because he drank and others would say today he was self-medicating.

She would say he wasn't always nice to her and in fact, she had reason to be scared.

So they mainly kept to themselves with this fear and shame-

that if he came unglued, no one was safe.

And so the pastor came.

For decades no one in this small town seemed to know what happened just past the edge of town with this man who could be overcome. So there, in the midst of a land without "healthcare options," the pastor did the one thing he could do. He showed up.

To try and call out the demons and keep them at bay and try as he could to restore a man and his family and keep them safe.

But for that pastor, and his wife who prayed as she watched his car head down the road again, everyone else seemingly either didn't know, didn't want to know, or had given up on this man.

A lot of those nights were on the weekend, and the pastor barely had the energy to stand up and proclaim the gospel on Sunday morning. And that's why he was such a mediocre preacher.

But don't you want to just ask "Why?"

Before the part of Psalm 22 we shared today, this psalm opens with "My God, why?" "Why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest." "My God, why?"

Sometimes I tell people I have a list of questions for God. You probably do too.

"My God, why?" It probably was the question of the family of the man in the gospel, and indeed the man himself.

He's past the edge of town, no longer in daily view, no longer connected. He no longer wore clothes, no longer seem human. Living in the tombs. These images capture the depth of being overpowered by what beset him.

Luke tells us those demons would drive him to deserted places. Drive him away from his family and all of the connections in life God intends for us. As if he was dead already in the tomb.

Demons are destructive in whatever form they appear.

What exactly the demons are, we don't know, but I think we can all understand what feeling overwhelmed is like. And ask why.

I have another "why?" for the gospel-

Why did Jesus give the demons permission to enter the pigs? As he cast them out, why not send them to the abyss, the place where, according to Jewish understanding, they would wait with the dead awaiting judgment?

Why instead let them go into the pigs?

It's been suggested that this furthers a visual lesson to demonstrate Jesus' power. Out of that chaos, we see not only the power of the demons, we also see God's greater power in Jesus as transformative. Good news for us.

I think there's another equally powerful message that leads us where I believe where God desires that we channel our energy instead of staying stuck in asking "why?"

Facing the demons in our world is hard.

When we don't ask why, sometimes we try to minimize.

This man and perhaps others like him have become "part of the furniture" if you will.

No longer shocking, no longer an active concern. Too big of a problem. Maybe every time people pass the man on the way in and out of town, they just shrug shoulders and move on. Like we might when seeing the man with the cardboard sign at the highway interchange, who some might dismiss as perhaps not REALLY troubled, just panhandling.

I wonder though if the man in the gospel has not only been ignored because he is a constant, but also because we have the capacity to create distance when we are uncomfortably bothered. Because demons and fear go together.

Perhaps prefer to say, “but for the grace of God go I.” Not only as a thanksgiving, but as a way to distance ourselves. “But for the grace of God, go I.” Keep those things at bay.

But the effect of demons should be taken seriously. They destroy whatever they touch. They touch us all.

And in the gospel, when they hurl themselves into the pigs and the pigs hurl themselves into the sea, now everyone is affected. It gets people’s attention, like our news headlines do today at least for a moment.

This chaos is not our preferred state.

ITS NOT GOD’S EITHER.

So Jesus shows up. He stepped into the world of this man and his demons. He is the embodiment of the psalm, “O Lord, be not far from me.”

He shows that the grace of God appears in chaos places, bringing restoration to those who struggle- whatever the demons are.

And Jesus struggles with them.

We get a hint of this in the gospel in the Greek, which tells us that when Jesus met the man, he **BEGAN** commanding the demons to come out.

Not just “Jesus commanded them”- it was not a one-word dramatic event. No instantaneous “**BAM! No more demons!**”

He joins the man in a sustained effort to address these many forces. And Jesus is not afraid to name a thing for what it is.

Our world has many demons and many, “My God, why?” people and places and moments. Jesus sends us. To be the ones who call upon a powerful God, and promise to “Be not far” - to stay for the long task of restoration.

Every time the phone rang, the pastor went to the farm and he didn’t have much to bring with him. But he reminded those folks beset by forces seemingly too big for any of them of this gospel-

The lengths to which God will go to be with us. To love and restore us.

To erase separation and bring us back.

This is the gospel response to “My God, why?”

And I wonder- what if while the pastor was showing up, what if others had advocated for better care for the man?

What if they had decided that his well-being was essential to theirs?

This is our calling.

Some of us may be called to be present with and pray with those we meet who feel at the center of chaos.

Some of us may be called to work for large scale change and advocacy in our world's torments.

Some of us may be called to provide the financial resources to support the work of others. But all of us are in some way called to not allow those who struggle with forces that feel too large to feel abandoned.

To join them in the places of "my God, why?"

And say, "I may not know, but I am here and God is too. You are never alone."