

ABT Synod Convention Sending Worship
June 18, 2016 (for use in ABT Synod congregations June 19, 2016)
Bishop Larry Kochendorfer



Convention Theme: Liberated by God's Grace

Convention Text: *"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast"* (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Assigned texts:

I Kings 19:1-4 (5-7), 8-15a

Psalm 42

Galatians 3:23-29

Luke 8:26-39

This past Thursday afternoon our Synod of Alberta and the Territories Convention began in Camrose and concluded yesterday afternoon with the Sending Worship.

Delegates from across our Synod, guests and visitors, gathered to discuss, discern, share stories, drink coffee and visit, conduct business, elect, drink coffee and visit, worship, break bread together, and to drink coffee and visit.

The theme of this year's convention, chosen by Synod Council, was the Lutheran World Federation's theme for the Commemoration of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, "Liberated by God's Grace."

Three keynote presentations and conversation developed this theme: "Salvation – Not For Sale" by The Rev. Dr. Gordon Jensen, "Human Beings – Not For Sale" from our National Bishop Susan Johnson (via video technology), and "Creation – Not For Sale" by the Anglican National Indigenous Bishop, Mark MacDonald.

Thank you for prayers as delegates, guests and visitors gathered.

In today's gospel reading we hear that Jesus is out there – out there somewhere in the Gerasenes – somewhere opposite Galilee – out – in gentile territory.

He's crossing over the Sea of Galilee to the land of the Gerasenes – which means that he's not just crossing the sea – he's also crossing boundaries. This is gentile territory and no self-respecting Jewish rabbi would set foot on this soil.

But – this is Jesus.

And as he stepped out on to the land he is met by a man – a man on the fringe – a man on the edge – one who has lost that thin veneer of rationality by which we separate the “sane” from the “insane.”

This one lives in a graveyard among the tombs.

This one is naked and tormented – at times bound in chains to protect from self-destruction – bound in chains to protect others.

This one is a mournful picture of isolation.

Separated from community – from family – from all the living – for, this one lives among the dead.

I find it absolutely distressing – troubling – utterly disturbing – that this one has no name – no identity – no name except for that which he is captive to: “Legion.”

As Jesus steps out on to the land – on to gentile territory – he is met by this one who falls down before him and shouts – who cries out: “*What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?...*”

...I beg you, do not torment me.”

In agonizing anguish “Legion” screams at Jesus – begging him not to send them to the dark abyss from which they came – begging him to let them go into a herd of pigs – who rush headlong into the abyss of the sea where they drown.

Those tending the pigs rush too. The herdsman – one translation says – *scared to death* – run telling everyone – everyone in the city and in the country – what had happened.

And the people came – and they found him sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.

“And they were afraid.”

Afraid – scared to death – they insist that Jesus leave them. Leave the Gerasenes.

And Jesus gets into the boat and sets off.

And this one – *once* bound in chains, tormented, isolated, on the edge, living among the dead – *now* sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind – wants to go with Jesus – with this One who saw not just “Legion” but him.

At the heart, our gospel reading today is about identity – this one’s identity – and ours.

This one has no name – no identity – no name except for that which he is captive to – no name except for that which he is enslaved to.

“What is your name?” Jesus asks. The response is heartbreaking – upsetting – *“‘Legion,’ for many demons had entered him.”*

David Lose (preacher, theologian and seminary president) suggests that this one is more than possessed, he is occupied – for this is what a legion was – a unit by which the Roman military organized itself.

This one is occupied. Occupied by a host of unclean spirits – for as Lose indicates – a Roman army “legion” designated some 6,000 soldiers.

“Legion.”

This name is perhaps even more shocking when we hear Eugene Peterson’s rendering of the Greek in his work: *The Message*. Peterson translates this way: *“Jesus asked him, ‘What is your name?’ ‘Mob. My name is Mob.’*

No name – no identity – except for that which occupies him.

Not Elijah, or Isaac, or John, or Larry; it's Legion – it's Mob.

And in *this* name, this one is completely defined by what overwhelms him, by what robs him of joy and health, by what hinders him and keeps him bound, by all that keeps him from experiencing life in its abundance – by all that enslaves him.

“Legion.” “Mob.”

And here's the thing dear friends: I think a lot of us aren't all that different – as individuals and as church – named, I mean, by all that we are captive to – identified by all that occupies us – defined by all that enslaves us.

Don't we also tend to define ourselves – or to be defined – in terms of our apparent deficiencies and setbacks, our disappointments and failures? Not always, of course, but enough to rob us of the abundant life God intends that we experience and share?

Why is it that often when we – as individuals – as church – want to take a risk and in this way be vulnerable, we are reminded of every failure, every disappointment we've experienced before? Perhaps because we've allowed these things to possess us. We, too, are Legion. Mob.

Moreover, we live in a culture that seeks to create in us a palpable sense of lack. The majority of advertisements we see or listen to have as their goal creating in us a powerful sense of insecurity. The same message is broadcast loud and strong within many communities of faith.

Whether these messages focus on our looks or status, our bank accounts or investment income, congregational staffing or projection wizardry on Sunday morning they seek to create in us a sense of insufficiency that can only be remedied by buying into the product – by the solution being marketed – by working harder – by serving on more committees.

And all too often we comply. And we believed the false promise made. Because we also believed its claim: that we are insufficient – and that we can – we must – do it ourselves – purchase our liberation – work our own salvation. We, too, are Legion. Mob.

We are – we confess – a broken people.

But there is good news. Liberating news for us today.

Did you notice in today's reading that after releasing this man Jesus sails away again?

A small point in the story – but hugely significant. For it means that all Jesus did in the land of the Gerasenes – Gentile territory – was heal this one occupied man.

Which *might* mean that Jesus' whole detour into this strange and unfamiliar place was to do just that, to rid this man of his demons and to transform – to liberate him – from Legion – from Mob – to being a human being again – a human being who was also a beloved child of God.

Here's the good news.

Jesus is still crossing boundaries that we create – still coming to us – and saying to us again and again that we are more than the sum total of our past failures and disappointments – we are more than our brokenness.

We are God's beloved children, forgiven of our sins, made whole, blessed with an open future – liberated by God's grace.

So also Jesus comes to tell us that no matter how many messages tell us otherwise, we are not insufficient nor undeserving of love.

Is this not the whole point of Jesus' ministry and mission – to tell us – or, rather, *show* us -- just how much God loves? How much God loves you, me – all of humanity? And all of creation?

Incarnation, life-crossing boundaries, arms open on the cross in a world-wide embrace of love and grace and solidarity, resurrection and surprising new life, ascension and the gifting of the Spirit.

Today's gospel reading is about identity.

The Gerasene man Jesus encounters lost his amid the mob, but Jesus gave it back to him. And so also dear friends, Jesus gives us our identity.

It's the identity first announced to us at baptism, when we were washed with water, marked with the cross of Christ, and sealed with the Holy Spirit – forever.

This is powerful for us because it dares to call the identities foisted upon us or that we have created a lie and invites us to receive once again our God-given identity of being a beloved child gifted with love, honor, and grace.

Nowhere is this made clearer than in baptism, when God announces God's unconditional love for us and publically declares us God's beloved children.

This baptismal identity stands over and against all those other false identities – all those other false names thrown our way – and again and again tells us of God's love calling us back – again and again calling us back to our right minds and grace-filled identities – and again and again sending us out to join God in God's mission of liberation for all.

Send out. Sent on our way.

Jesus says to us today, together with this one: *“Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.”*

Thanks be to God.

Sources:

Demon Possession and Why I Named My Depression “Francis”, June 25, 2013, The Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber. Complete sermon available at: <http://www.nadiabolzweber.com/latest-sermons/page/17>.

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Legion, June 16, 2013, “Dear Working Preacher”, The Rev. Dr. David Lose. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2609>.