

Sermon for Pentecost 2
June 19, 2022
All Saints Church, Littleton, N.H.
The Rev. John Morris

Scripture: I Kings 19:1-4, 5-7, 8-15s; Psalm 42; Galatians 3:23-29, and Luke 8:26-39

First, let's deal with those poor pigs that jumped into the lake and drowned. The People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals would not like this story and if this story were made into a movie, it would NOT have the disclaimer that "no animals were harmed in the production of this film."

Let's put this story in historical context. In the 1st century, the military forces of the Roman Empire occupied the Jewish homeland. That was the fundamental reality of the Jewish population. Like today's Ukrainians, they were forced to confront enemy soldiers every day. In the Roman army, what was the name of a cohort of soldiers? "Legion"---and in Luke's story, that is the name of the demon possessing the man in the tombs. Aha! Also at that time, what did Jewish peasants derisively call Roman soldiers? "Pigs" (an unfortunate name in our own country in the 1960s, when opponents of the police called them "pigs")

When I was pastor of St. Martin's Church in Fairlee, Vermont, on the 4th Sunday of Advent each year, I would invite the children of the parish to help set up the parish's crèche after the Eucharist that day. It was a beautiful wooden crèche and was fun to unpack. At some point in the parish's history, someone had smuggled a wooden pig into the scene. Some adults looked askance at that, because they knew that devout Jews like Joseph and Mary would have considered pigs to be unclean. But the kids loved it. Some of them lived on farms where pigs were raised, so they thought it was great to have pigs at Jesus' birth!

But for 1st century Jews, pigs were unclean and abominable.

The Roman occupiers had invaded the Jewish homeland from the Mediterranean and lots of Jews wished they would go back where they came from. As we say about annoying people, those Jews wished the Romans would "go jump in the lake." The Ukrainians today probably wish the same thing about the Russian invaders.

Put all that together and we can ask: What would a 1st century Jewish peasant think if someone came along and made the Roman "pigs" go "jump in the lake?" Hallelujah!

Is that what this strange story is about? Is it about the dream of the Jewish people to be rid of the Roman occupying forces? There were no video cameras on that hillside long ago so we don't know exactly what happened, but if Jesus was a person who could help get rid of the Romans, that's Good News!

Luke's story begins with the liberation of one man from demonic possession that had robbed him of his "right mind." But then I think the story moves into more of a social/political dimension about God's dream of liberation for any people who are dominated by a foreign power. For example, the French people in World War II had the

same dream---get ride of these Nazis! The American colonists in the 18th century had the same dream—get rid of these British occupiers!

The flip side of that American story shows the tragic irony of American history: at the same time that the colonists on the East Coast were dreaming of getting rid of the British, the indigenous people of the country---the America Indians, the Native Americans---were dreaming of being liberated from domination by white Europeans. How often did those indigenous people wish the colonists would “go jump in the lake?”

That is a huge tragedy in our American history. But we are having a hard time these days being honest about our own history. How interesting that today is “Juneteenth,” the holiday in the Black community that commemorates the day in June of 1865 when enslaved African-Americans in Texas finally found out that they had been emancipated. This good news reached them two years after the actual Emancipation Proclamation and two months after the peace treaty at Appomattox. No email in those days, so it took a long time for the news to get to Texas!

How many of us learned about Juneteenth as we grew up? I didn’t know anything about it until a few years ago. That is sad, because it is an important event in Black history. Sadly, some people and some school authorities don’t want students these days to learn much about Black history or the history of racist policies and racist institutions in our country.

As I see what is happening in our schools these days in terms of teaching authentic American history, I think back to my own days as an elementary school teacher. I worked mostly with first and second graders and I found that I could include regular teaching about Black history into our curriculum. Even six and seven year olds can understand the stories of people like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman. They can learn at their level how Africans were captured and enslaved but some of them escaped. “Follow the Drinking Gourd” is a great song for children to learn. Likewise, I could find ways to deal with American segregation by moving tables and desks to the side and setting up chairs to simulate rows of seats in a bus. Then we could act out the story of some children (“purple” people) being forced to sit in the back of the bus and other children (“green” people) being allowed to sit in the front of the bus. When some of the children predictably cried, “That’s not fair!,” we had the chance to have some good discussion about why these things happen.

Would I be allowed to do that kind of teaching today? Would school authorities tell me that I was making children uncomfortable with those activities? And to complicate the situation even more, would those same authorities who didn’t like my social studies lessons also tell me that I had to have a loaded gun in the classroom for protection?

That is insane.

I think about that young man in Buffalo, New York, last month who killed 10 Black people at a supermarket. Had any of his teachers ever tried to help him be empathetic to Black people? I will be interested to find out about that as we learn more about him. What we do know is that he was radicalized online by white supremacist conspiracy theories. Like that man in Luke’s story, this young man was no longer in his “right mind.”

One commentator about this tragedy used a word that I have been thinking a lot about. The commentator described the process of the young man as: "zealotization." We can see what "zealotization" looks like if we watch film of the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia five years ago. As we watch film of the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S Capitol we can see the same process at work. Zealotization often leads to violence. In our first reading today, we hear how the prophet Elijah spoke truth to power, but also resorted to violence as he killed King Ahab's royal prophets. Elijah is described as being "zealous," so we should not be surprised at his violence.

When rigid devotion to an ideology become zealotry, it often leads to violence...and God's dream of harmony among humans turns to a nightmare and we move further away from Paul's vision of a world in which there are no fundamental distinctions between humans.

Psalms 42 is certainly a good Psalm for these days. I know what the Psalmist means by "heaviness of soul" and a soul that is "disquieted within me." But I also take comfort from the Psalmist's admonition to "trust God."

May God empower us to be restored to our right minds so we can resist the demonic forces plaguing us today.

May God liberate us from the zealotry that so often leads to violence.

May God give us the grace to use our intelligence, courage, and political action to overcome the forces that are fracturing our nation

May we be restored to our right minds so we can recognize that in Christ, there is no east or west, in him no south or north and in Christ there is no longer any dehumanizing distinctions that prevent us from being one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.

A final story: In 1993, the Diocese of Vermont elected Mary Adelia McCleod to be Bishop. She was the first woman to be elected as a Diocesan Bishop. The preacher at her consecration was Barbara Harris, Suffragan Bishop of Massachusetts. She was the first woman to be elected Bishop in the Anglican Communion. The consecration at the Flynn Theatre in Burlington, Vermont was an historic event. At the end of her sermon that day, Bishop Harris closed her notebook and said to the people in the congregation something like, "You folks can listen in, but I want to say something directly to Mary Adelia." With Mary Adelia standing in front of her, Bishop Harris said, "Sister Mary, always remember that the Power behind you is greater than the task in front of you."

I believe that is true for us today. The Power behind us is greater than the task in front of us. Thanks be to God.

Amen.