

Fourth Sunday After Pentecost, Year C

June 20, 2010

Isaiah 65: 1-9, Psalm 22: 19-28, Galatians 3: 23-29, Luke 8: 26-39

Isaiah 65:1-9

{1} I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, "Here I am, here I am," to a nation that did not call on my name. *{2}* I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices; *{3}* a people who provoke me to my face continually, sacrificing in gardens and offering incense on bricks; *{4}* who sit inside tombs, and spend the night in secret places; who eat swine's flesh, with broth of abominable things in their vessels; *{5}* who say, "Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am too holy for you." These are a smoke in my nostrils, a fire that burns all day long. *{6}* See, it is written before me: I will not keep silent, but I will repay; I will indeed repay into their laps *{7}* their iniquities and their ancestors' iniquities together, says the LORD; because they offered incense on the mountains and reviled me on the hills, I will measure into their laps full payment for their actions. *{8}* Thus says the LORD: As the wine is found in the cluster, and they say, "Do not destroy it, for there is a blessing in it," so I will do for my servants' sake, and not destroy them all. *{9}* I will bring forth descendants from Jacob, and from Judah inheritors of my mountains; my chosen shall inherit it, and my servants shall settle there.

Psalm 22:19-28

{19} But you, O LORD, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid! *{20}* Deliver my soul from the sword, my life from the power of the dog! *{21}* Save me from the mouth of the lion! From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me. *{22}* I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you: *{23}* You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel! *{24}* For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him. *{25}* From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him. *{26}* The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD. May your hearts live forever! *{27}* All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. *{28}* For dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations.

Galatians 3:23-29

{23} Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. *{24}* Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. *{25}* But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, *{26}* for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. *{27}* As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. *{28}* 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 are one in Christ Jesus. *{29}* And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Luke 8:26-39

{26} Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. *{27}* As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. *{28}* When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me"-- *{29}* for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) *{30}* Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. *{31}* They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. *{32}* Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. *{33}* Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. *{34}* When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. *{35}* Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, 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. *{36}* Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. *{37}* Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great

fear. So he got into the boat and returned. {38} The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, {39} "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.

I don't usually do this (at least I hope I don't) and certainly don't think it is necessary or even desirable within the confines of a sermon, but I want to briefly explain the context of all of our readings before exploring a few points from the Gospel story.

As you know, we, along with many other Churches (Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, Methodist, American Baptist, United Church of Christ, etc.) follow a three-year cycle of appointed readings (the lectionary). This is a good thing because it gives us a broad exposure to a lot of scripture over those years and is a good discipline for preachers as well, whose tendency would probably be to pick only highly selected texts on which to preach. Generally, the first reading from the Old Testament is chosen to somehow "mirror" or "play off" of the Gospel reading in some way, while the second reading is more or less continuous and sequential selections from various Epistles. One of the problems, though, is that we are sometimes given only small sections of readings and without the broader context the meaning is either unclear, strange, or even totally different. So it is, at least to my ears, with the first reading.

My guess is that the first reading was chosen primarily because of verse 4: "...who sit in tombs, and spend the night in secret places...", which somewhat mirrors the Gospel story about the possessed man who lived in the tombs. If that's the case, and I suspect it is, then it is a bit too subtle and more than a stretch.

The first reading for today comes from the next to last chapter of the book of Isaiah in a section called "Third Isaiah" by some biblical scholars. The footnote in my Bible calls chapters 56-66 "miscellaneous post-restoration oracles". (Yeah, that's helpful.) The messages here are primarily ones of hope and encouragement, though in the later chapters also contain some questions and concerns from those who returned to Israel after the deportation had ended, only to find that things were not exactly what they expected.

So, what we heard is actually the beginning of God's response to a plea at the start of chapter 64: "Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down." The remainder of the chapter describes just how bad things are. It is, in some ways, a request for God to "fix it" as well as wondering, "why bad things happen to good people".

God's response was that the current situation had more to do with the poor choices, lack of fidelity and vision, misplaced priorities, and disobedience of the people rather than with God. God was always ready to help and always present, but the people were not willing to seek or ask, going about their own ways instead. A more contemporary way to understand this response might be something like God saying, "Don't look at me! I didn't get you into this mess!"

But, God still held out hope and promise, albeit to a small part of the people who continued to struggle to be faithful in the midst of uncertainty, disappointment, and competing loyalties. In chapter 66, the final chapter, God says, "Behold, I am about to do a new thing, do you not perceive it?"

So, the first reading is actually, in a strange way, words of hope and assurance. God is still present even when things are not exactly working out as planned. Look for God's "new thing".

In the *Letter to the Galatians* St. Paul is passionately defending and exploring the implications of the whole "grace thing" to a community struggling with some confusion and alternate opinions, specifically as related to all Christians, including Gentiles, maintaining the marks of God's chosen people, as stipulated in the Torah. "if you want to love Jesus, then you have to be Jewish". Paul explained the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus brought new light and clarity to the Scriptures, to history, and to the promises God made to Abraham and the children of Abraham (Israel) to be "a light" and blessing to the nations. St. Paul said that the law, while good and useful, was now seen to be temporary in the larger picture of what God was doing. Clinging to a familiar past and to cherished securities was now, in effect, actually separating people and "negating" the whole notion of grace. Today we heard one of two wonderful instances about how the new identity in Christ changes all of the familiar labels and distinctions. This remains a beautiful and challenging vision, even though St. Paul himself seemed to have difficulty implementing it all the time and in all places. So, it's an ongoing process.

Finally, the Gospel story comes about in a whole section describing Jesus as teaching, healing, and gathering followers. All of these stories were intended to raise questions for the readers/hearers about the identity and authority of Jesus. "Just who is this guy and what is God up to through His message and ministry?" Immediately before what we heard today is the story of Jesus stilling the storm. The amazed disciples asked, "Who is this, then, that even the winds and the waves obey him?" That is intended to be our question as well.

Today, the tormented man asked, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?” That, too, is intended for us as well. We are being invited into what God is doing in and through Jesus.

Okay, now a couple of points from the Gospel story.

There is a lot of spectacular action that would make any horror movie director really happy: the possessed man with above average strength who live in a cemetery, the demons speaking to Jesus, and the herd of pigs driven over a cliff.

With all of that, it is easy to miss something much more subtle. In verse 30, Jesus asks the man, “What is your name?” Prevailing wisdom and scholarship sees this as Jesus doing what any exorcist of His time would do. To know the name of the demon was to have power over it.

That is probably correct, but I see something much more poignant going on and wish that this version were true. That man could hardly escape notice. He intrudes, uninvited, into whatever plans Jesus might have had. He was naked, wild, bizarre-someone that most of us would seek to avoid. He had lost all sense of his identity and place in society. I like to think that Jesus, as He frequently did, was able to see past all that, difficult as it was (and is), and simply asked *the man* his name. “Wait, hold on. What’s your name? Who are you? Do you remember? You are not just what’s wrong with you or your current circumstances.”

From time to time non-member folks stop into my office for advice or prayer. They are usually a little nervous and uncomfortable and almost always launch right into their issues or concerns. On good days, I always stop them and ask, “What’s your name?” It’s a way of saying, “*You* are important. You are not only defined by whatever it is that may be wrong in your life.”

I hope that was the case for Jesus. *That* would have been the beginning of the man’s deliverance and healing. To still be able to recognize a human being under all that craziness is, to me, a powerful miracle. To remind the man that he had an identity separate from his current circumstances, illness, or actions would have been quite a gift and grace.

What a great message for us.

The second thing that stands out is the strange reaction of the “townsfolk” to the miraculous healing. The man, unavoidably, was apparently quite well known and had become, as it were, “part of the landscape”. The

newly unemployed swine herders had run into the town saying something like, “You’ll never guess what happened and what we saw!” So, the folks came, in droves, to check it out.

They were, understandably, dazed, confused, and scared, but you would think that after they had some time to adjust they would have said, “Wow! Do it again! Can you stay for a while?” Instead, they kick Jesus out. “Thanks, but no thanks.”

Now, in all fairness, the text doesn’t say why they acted like that, but here’s a related message. How often we become strangely comfortable with suffering, either our own or that of others. How often do we settle for what we know, even if it is unhealthy or no longer helpful? We think it’s better to feel sad or mad than to not feel at all. Bad attention is better than no attention at all. We resist change or the possibility of healing because we don’t know what will come next. I hear stories from those coming out of addictions that, once on the path to being healthier, they no longer fit in to their earlier, unhealthy environments. In fact, former friends sometimes try to “drag” them back down. One member of a couple or family seeks therapy and changes his/her behavior, only to be met by resistance from the rest of the family or the other spouse. This happens not only for individuals, but for organizations as well.

God grant us the courage of that tormented man, who although reluctantly, was still able to cry out for change and healing.

Let us pray.

You seek us out, O God, even when we do not seek you. You call us by name, even when we and almost everyone else forgets it. You invite us into a new future, even when we want to cling to what we know. Thank you.

AMEN.