



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, JUNE 22, 2025
READINGS FOR PROPER 7, YEAR C INCLUDE:
ISAIAH 65:1-9; PSALM 22:18-27; GALATIANS 3:23-29; LUKE 8:26-39

JUDGMENT ON THE ROYAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE POLITICS OF HOPE AND MERCY

Luke 8:26-39 *[Jesus and his disciples arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. 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. 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" -- 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.) Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. 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. 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. When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. 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. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. 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. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, "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 always get a chuckle when someone suggests to me that Jesus was not political, which is really about suggesting that I, as a Christian preacher, should avoid political references in the pulpit. If I give them the

benefit of the doubt, I take them to mean that Jesus was not a politician—that is, one seeking election within the structures of imperial government. I would agree with that

narrower definition. Jesus was not seeking elected office. But he was decidedly political.

Walter Brueggemann, the theologian and Old Testament scholar who died last week at the age of 92, has had a significant impact on my own spiritual journey, and by extension, my preaching.

Brueggemann called Jesus the “Great Voice of Otherwise,” a prophetic figure who exposed the contradictions of Empire and offered an alternative reality based on God’s dreams for us. That’s political, folks. It got Jesus killed.

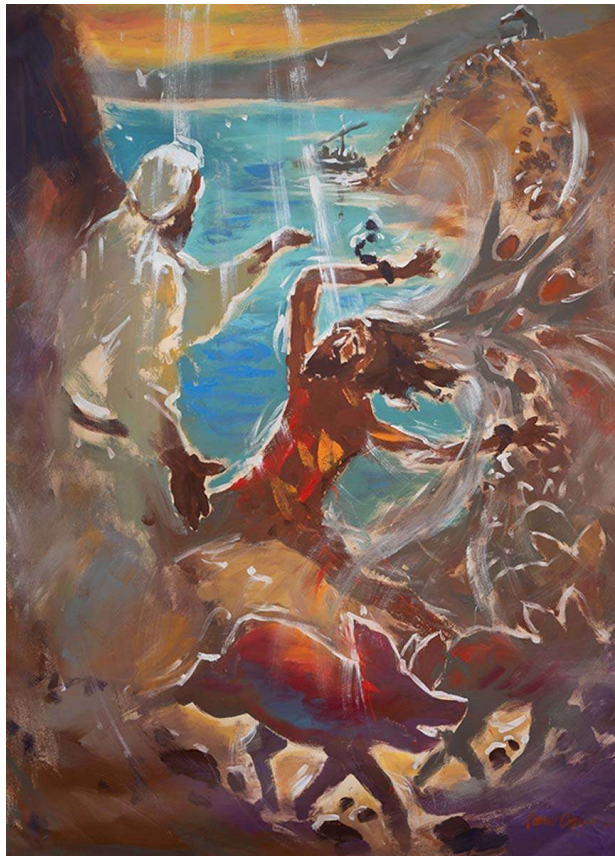
To speak of the Kingdom of God as a counter to Caesar’s kingdom is political. To say that Jesus is Lord is political because allegiance to Christ takes precedence over all the earthly pledges of allegiance. And Jesus’ politics were always orienting to the subversive power of forgiveness, love and mercy, especially to those on the margins.

No one in the gospels is more on the margins than this man forced to live in a haunted landscape of demons and death, shackled, subjugated, objectified. History does not afford him a name; he is known as the

Gerasene demoniac, despised by his own people, left to languish in the graveyard.

Where Jesus sees him, has mercy on him. Mercy meets the demons straight on.

At first glance this story is about a man with mental illness whom Jesus heals. And there are some quirky parts thrown in make it memorable. Demonic shouting, crazy pigs flying off cliffs into the sea, the fear-driven response of some of the locals who see in Jesus so much power that they want him simply to leave. Divine presence is too much for some.ⁱ



But leaving it there, as a story objectifying one man riddled with demons, would miss this story’s deeper truth penetrating the fabric of our lives here and now. And this is the political pivot I’m inviting us to take today.

Jesus sails to the other side of the lake—from Galilee and its familiar comforts to the other side, to Gerasa, where the Others dwell, forced to eke out an existence under the imperial thumb.

Xenophobic suspicion and hatred had long since forced the deportation of the Others from the more fertile Galilean countryside, across the lake, where the craggy soil would grow thickets of brush and little else. Pigs

could exist there and became the means of survival for these Other people. Pigs, the proverbial uncleanest of the unclean.

And in this community of outsiders there was one who, as symptom bearer and scapegoat, would be shackled and left amidst the tombs, his solitary confinement, stripped of his dignity.

Jesus visited this man in his prison, and must have loved him, because the demons that haunted the man begged him to stop that—stop loving him into worthiness. Leave us alone; let us continue as we are. We are Legion!

Legion wanted the status quo. Legion, the term for a phalanx of Caesar's army, six thousand-strong. Legion, the epitome of power, the military force, the keepers of the peace—a peace maintained through brutal means. It is no peace.

It is not peace when it is premised on the suffering of some for the benefit of others...when some must “pass over the way that their tears have watered,” when some must “tread the path through the blood of the slaughtered,” to use the well-worn words from the hymn *Lift Every Voice*.

The prophetic and political imagination of Jesus was a disruptive force that the empire could not tolerate because it was a full-throated challenge to what Brueggemann called the “royal consciousness”—the system of power, consumerism, and control that seeks to sate its gluttonous need for more, more, more.

Jesus brings to bear the great prophetic tradition, which has three themes: 1) Judgment, 2) Hope, and 3) Mercy.

First, Judgment. Judgment is not so much a finger-wagging denunciation as it is seeing the crisis moment as an upending of the status quo, an upending which the *powers that be* will always resist, and into which the prophetic voice holds space for the anxiety we feel when our current world is vanishing, and we can't yet see the shape of what is to come.

Feeling uneasy in these crisis moments is natural—there's no need to deny it. But what we do with that uneasiness, and who we foist it upon to relieve our own anxieties—this is what defines the trajectory of the world before us.

Brueggemann said that undifferentiated anxiety will orient every time to consumerist numbing out at another's expense. The royal consciousness will want to “narcotize” us into soporific self-interest, but the salacious lie of this path is that it leads to a “deprecation of memory and a ridicule of hope.” We forget the lessons learned across history, and we faint into submission when we lose hope.

When we lose social memory and courageous hope, then we identify the symptom bearer and scapegoat, who is shackled and stripped of his dignity. We forget they have a name; we forget their humanity; we resign ourselves to the lie that it is better for them to suffer than us all.

But Jesus, this “Great Voice of Otherwise,” offers another way, which brings us to the second prevailing prophetic theme: Hope.

Hope is the language of the prophetic tradition girded by the whispers, shouts and signs that God promises: I am about to do a new thing. Pay attention right here, right now!

Hope is not some ephemeral optimism that the chaos of our current crisis moment will suddenly subside. It is not dependent on our making the correct extrapolation about the future, as if we can read the tea leaves and figure it all out. Hope is predicated on the faithfulness of God has promised to show up. It is the courageous trust that God is doing a new thing here and now, and is inviting us into it.

Which brings me to Mercy. Mercy is the capacity to give oneself away for the sake of others, expecting nothing in return. It is not transactional. The royal consciousness cannot compute that.

Mercy does not seek to consume or hoard all the resources for oneself; it does not create scapegoats; it creates a holy attachment to others.

And friends, here’s the nut of it: society cannot survive without mercy. So I ask you, can you see how practicing mercy in this crisis moment is at once political, prophetic, and poetically referential to God who desires nothing less for us?

This is our moment, this crisis moment, where hope and mercy will reveal the path forward for us. Let us be on our way.

ⁱ The image is of the Gerasene Demoniac
<https://images.app.goo.gl/WrxWTVmweZmJzLUc6>