

**Second Sunday after Pentecost (c)**  
**Isaiah 65:1-9 Galatians 3:23-29 Luke 8:26-39**  
**St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH**  
**June 19, 2022 [Traditional]**

Today's gospel always reminds me of a story I read about Winston Churchill. Towards the end of World War II, Germany's last major line of defense in the west was the Rhine River. It was very well defended. The western allies knew it was going to be very costly to just batter their way in a frontal assault across the Rhine. They were looking for other options, to save lives. And it happened, by sheer luck, some American troops found a bridge that was still intact, across the river, at a small town (Remagen). They quickly saw the opportunity, and forced their way across it with relatively few losses. So, the allies had a beach-head in German territory sooner than they'd expected.

Winston Churchill was so excited about it that he couldn't contain himself. He demanded to be taken across the bridge at Remagen, before it was really safe. But he insisted. Once he stepped off the ferry-boat onto German soil...forgive the imagery...but he immediately marked his territory as only boys can do. Then he smoked a cigar. He cracked some jokes with his generals. He walked around for a while, just savoring this wonderful breakthrough. Finally, after all he'd been through as a leader, here he was, standing on enemy soil. Another sign—Hitler was done. After reveling in it for a while, Church turned around, and came back across the river.

It might seem strange—but I think it's accurate—to say that in today's gospel, Jesus is doing something kind of similar. Remember, Jesus stuck closely to Jewish territory during his ministry. But in today's gospel he takes this brief trip to non-Jewish territory, on the far side of the Sea of Galilee. It's very symbolic. It always helps me to think of it this way: Jesus is establishing a beachhead for his army on pagan ground. Before his troops can go in, Jesus has to break through first, and he establishes a kind of beachhead in enemy territory. Obviously Jesus is not about waging war with weapons. But someday soon, he will be sending his followers out into the pagan world to conquer it...with God's Word. So, in today's gospel, he's standing at the gateway to that pagan world. And the first thing he does is throw a legion of demons out of that poor gentile man. It's like he's clearing the path through the enemy forces. Now the coast is clear. But of course, Jesus turns around and comes back. He has something to finish back home in Israel before those gentiles outside can truly receive him. Jesus has to defeat the enemy in his final fortress—death—before the final invasion starts.

Jesus had a vision so big and so universal that no one at the time dreamed of his intentions. He did not come just to preach a new way of living a good balanced life on earth. No. He came to inflict permanent, crippling damage on the enemy and his forces of sin and death. He destroyed their power on Easter. And once their power was tied up and bound—pushed to the side—now that on a cross he had established a permanent beach-head in the world, he was going to send his troops out, to claim the whole world for himself. Now, his church is all set to finish the job he started. So now from our Easter beach-head, here at St. John's and across the world, we're set to invade hostile

territory. Wherever we go, we bring people news about the future. We bring good news of how they can be part of God's future without cost.

You know, too often we're tempted to think of church as a place where we get something that helps keep us afloat as we fight against the superior forces out there. Our spiritual attitude becomes...kind of defensive. It's like the enemy has already divided the church into little pockets; he's got us separated from each other, so we think we're fighting our own little personal Christian battles. But that certainly is not the biblical picture of God's Church. Jesus says the gates of hell will not prevail against his followers.

Jesus assumes his Church is always going to be on the offensive. It's not the devil who is bringing his gates against us—that doesn't make sense. Gates don't move. We are the ones beating down the gates of hell. The enemy can no longer gain the upper hand after Easter, except by scaring people with lies. He cannot win. All he can do is fight a war of attrition...create misery, make our losses bigger at the end of the game. But still, we win. So the New Testament church never sits still. It's always invading. Going out into the world, claiming everything for the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

You know, the demons in our culture right now are hoping the church doesn't wake up. Because we tell people they are not beholden to anyone else—no government, no institution, no philosophy—no one but God himself. We want people to stand up for themselves in the amazing grace of God. That's why the demons are afraid of you and me, right here at St. John's. They'd rather us be sleep in the garden. They hate it when we wake up and play offense.

When Jesus steps off the boat in today's gospel, into that pagan, gentile territory, I personally picture him stepping into 21<sup>st</sup> century America. People are worshiping a thousand different gods. When people for whatever reason do not, or cannot, access the Holy Trinity, they become enslaved to the power of those little gods. People possessed by a legion of little gods are divided and weak...easy pickings for forces more powerful than they are.

And notice, in the gospel, how everyone in pagan land has given up on that poor man. The best they can do is put chains on him, keep him from hurting himself and others. That's a chilling picture of humanity. That's all humanity can do in the face of evil without God. They can't beat it...all they can do is try to channel it, control it. But now, Jesus brings genuine hope, *because he gives us a hope NOT based in ourselves*. He intervenes in our lives to break those powers' hold on us. And now the Holy Spirit drives us back out there to play offense against those powers. Yes, death is still out there. We'll meet up with it. But it can't beat us now.

The man in the gospel has a new master now. Before, he was destroying himself to get away from that legion of masters. Now, all he wants to do is *go out*, **follow** the One master who has given him freedom and life. Jesus tells him, "Live your life, but in everything you do, tell people about what God has done for you. Tell them about the new management under which you live." As a Christian, through my words and deeds, I

can show people that those demons out there no longer own me. I've got a new owner. One who lifts me up, makes me strong, and sends me out to play a joyful, loving offense in life.

I've seen some miracles in my life—miraculous turnarounds like the one in today's gospel. But one thing I've seen with my own eyes a hundred times is that change of ownership, which happens in today's gospel. I've seen people go from living life under the sway of a hundred petty little demons to a life under completely new management under Jesus Christ. That's the power of the resurrection. To follow the crucified King is to be free, it's to have the peace which passes all understanding. His break-through victory has set the stage for the rest of the war. We are his church—this *is* the beach-head that he has established in hostile territory. Now, what can stop us from crossing the river and finishing the job?