

Sermon for Sunday, June 19, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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It's a slightly bizarre story,
today's gospel,
isn't it?
Jesus heads across the Sea of Galilee,
away from his hometown,
and away from the comfort
of a countryside populated by his own people.
Across the sea,
to the narrow strip
of fertile land,
and then the steep heights of the Golan
rising
precipitously,
still under Roman rule, but populated
by strangers,
people
of a different faith

And all the rumors are true.
These people are different, strange,
if the man that meets them
as the boat touches the shore
is anything to go by.
He is naked
and raving.
Great.
And the disciples
are ready to push back the boat from the shore, and row as fast as they can
back to the other side,
back
where people at least
have the decency
to put on some clothes
and ask Jesus politely
for help.
Even though

they've just survived
a storm on the lake
and would much rather be
on firm ground.

But this ground isn't as firm as they thought,
populated by crazy people,
and suddenly the lake
looks a whole lot more attractive.

Which is pretty much where I suspect we are.
We live in a world of logic,
a world where medical science
has unlocked
a large percentage of the illnesses
that in the past were attributed
to evil forces.

Talking about demons and evil spirits
makes us uncomfortable;
today would be a good day
to abandon the gospel reading
and go for Elijah and God's still small voice
or Paul's great proclamation
that we are all one in Christ.

But if God had a hand
in shaping all of Scripture;
and if Luke's promise in verse 1 of chapter 1 of his gospel
that this is an orderly account
written so that Theophilus
and everyone else who reads it
might know the truth about Jesus,
if his promise is right,
then we can't ignore any part of this gospel,
not even
this.

Even if
it makes us uncomfortable,
and we don't quite know what to do with it.

One of the time honored ways
of understanding the bible, especially those parts of it
that we find hard,
is to look to other parts of Scripture
that help us
to make sense of it.

In the world of biblical studies,
it's called intertextuality;
using one text
to illuminate another.
And of course, we do it all the time,
without thinking.
When we read Jesus saying,
"I am the good shepherd",
our minds jump back
to Psalm 23, "the Lord is my Shepherd."

When we read the first chapter
of the gospel of John,
"In the beginning was the word..."
we remember the first chapter
of Geneses.
"In the beginning, God created..."

And as I read this gospel today,
one other text
came to mind.
It was the story
of the prodigal son.

Because there are just enough commonalities between the two
to wonder
how they might be connected.
And if, in fact,
it was Jesus' encounter with this man
that prompted him
not so much later
to come up with that parable
of the prodigal son?

In the story of the prodigal son,
the turning point
is when the son is described
as coming to himself.
It's that point
when he abandons his job
feeding the pigs,
and turns
towards home.

And I wonder
is Jesus thinking
of what happened
to this poor man
naked, raving,
living in a cemetery
surrounded by pigs?

Maybe the prodigal son
came to himself
because, like the crazy man,
somehow
he met Jesus.
And that meeting
changed his life.
He turned around, and headed home,
and his father welcomed him
with great joy.

And isn't that the key
to this story as well?

In a way,
the details of this man
don't matter.
Yes, he's described as being possessed
by demons,
which totally control him, body and mind.
But that is, effectively, just background.

What really matters
is his encounter
with Jesus,
and the contrast between his response
and that of the people from his town
who come out to see what has happened.

The man recognizes Jesus
- or at least, the forces that control him do -
and when Jesus commands them to leave,
they go.
What a dramatic demonstration
of the power of Jesus!
And next thing,
the man is found
in his right mind, fully clothed,
no trace of his previous craziness,
sitting,
listening
to Jesus.

And he wants to stay with Jesus,
to travel with him,
to be one of his followers.
But Jesus sends him home,
back to his family and his friends
and his community,
to tell them
what God has done.

Echoes
of the prodigal son,
coming to himself,
leaving the pigs behind
and returning home.

And the echoes
continue.
Because when the townspeople
hear what has happened to the crazy man

they go to see.
And their response?
It wasn't like the crazy man,
or indeed, like the crowds
who gathered around Jesus
back on the other side of the lake.
They
didn't want to follow Jesus;
they wanted him
to leave.

Their lives were just fine
before he showed up.
Comfortably settled,
the pigs providing
a good income;
the crazy man
safely confined
away in the cemetery.

But what do you do
when your prime breeding stock
have all drowned?
What do you do
when a crazy man begins acting normally?
What do you do
when God
interrupts your life?

Go away,
they said to Jesus.
Go back
to where you belong.
We don't want
you here.

Which kind of sounds
like the older son
in the parable
of the prodigal son.

His life
was just fine
with his younger brother
gone.
No more
being kept awake late into the night
by raucous parties.
No more wondering
how he would get everything done
if his little brother
failed to get up and do his chores -
as usual.
No more begging for attention from his father
who seemed to spend all his time
cleaning up his brother's
messes.

And then his brother
comes back.
And it all seems
to be beginning again.

You see, there are two things common
to these two stories.
Someone is transformed
and the people around them
are not happy.

It's a pattern
we see in other places
in the gospels.
Because Jesus keeps upsetting
the equilibrium.

It's one thing
to say to Jesus,
"Yes, I'll follow you."
It's another
to actually embrace the change
that that brings.

We live
in a time of immense change.
When the first men landed on the moon,
only one family in our street
had TV,
so we all went there to watch.
Now I can watch pretty much anything happening anywhere in the world
on my phone.
And many of you
have seen greater change than I have!

And one of the most common responses
to rapid change
is to seek comfort and security
in things that are familiar.
And for many of us,
church is one of those places we seek comfort.
We sit in a building
that has been essentially the same
for the last one hundred fifty years.
We say the same words
that we have said all our lives.
We spend time with the same people
who we have known
for decades.

But that's false security.
Because if anything is true about the gospel of Jesus Christ,
it is that it is about change.

Wherever Jesus goes,
he calls to people
and asks them
to follow him.
And that call to follow always - always
means a change.
Whether it's a call from a settled life
to trailing around the countryside with him,
like Simon and Andrew and James and John,

or a call to go back to the community
that previously ostracized you,
like the woman at the well,
and the woman who anointed Jesus' feet,
and yes, the crazy man with the demons,
or a call
to simply change how you live,
like to not judge other people,
or to sell some of your possessions and give to the poor,
or to love your enemies
its a call to change.

Or as Paul puts it
in the letter to the Romans,
"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,"
or in the second letter to the Corinthians,
to be transformed into the image of Christ.

The constant call of Christ
is to be transformed.

Jesus never
leaves us
where we are.

And it's hard.
It's hard to let go
of what we know,
hard to allow ourselves
to be changed.
That's why Jesus meets
with so much resistance,
back in the first century,
and today.
It's hard,
and it's scary.

But that is Christ's call to us.
To be transformed.
To change our lives

so that we become more and more like him.
And with the call,
is the promise.
I will be with you always.

So take a risk.
Do something
you've never done before.
Try praying
with new words.
Get to know
someone you don't know.
Choose to do something differently.
Allow God
to work in you,
to transform you
to make you more like Christ your Savior.
And know
that God will be with you.