

A Burning Faith

Exodus 3; Luke 8

In the verses preceding this morning's Gospel reading, Jesus rebukes the roaring wind and raging waters; suddenly, "all was calm" (Luke 8:24). Then, Jesus asks the disciples with him in the boat, "Where is your faith?"

He asked *where* is your faith and not *why* don't you have faith? Everyone has faith in something. *Where* suggests that the disciples put faith in the wrong things or the wrong God. What does faith look like when it is placed in Jesus, in the one who can calm the storms?

Turning now to our Gospel reading, where was the faith of the people in this town? Gerasene was a village by the Sea of Galilee. But other than its location, we know little about the ancient inhabitants except that they were Gentiles. Jews were forbidden to eat pork and would not have had a herd of swine.

From Luke's telling, however, we discern that these Gerasenes consumed a steady diet of fear. They were afraid of the man called Legion and tried to bind him with chains. They were afraid of the power of Jesus and asked him to leave. Let's not be quick to judge.

Our culture also consumes a steady diet of fear. Fear possesses us and leads to the demonization of others, whether of different ethnicity, gender, politics, or religion. As they say, you are what you eat; consuming fear, we are fearful, divided, and polarized. What does this say about where we place our faith?

Our reading from Exodus is the beginning of a long story. The Israelites suffered in slavery in Egypt, and God heard their cries. Yet, unlike Jesus calming the storm, God did not speak a word and instantly change everything. Rather, God called Moses, a flawed individual like each one of us, to lead the people out of Egypt. This exodus journey was arduous and slow, sometimes one step backward for every two steps forward. The people had to put their faith in God not in their fear.

I think of Harriet Tubman, who was nicknamed Moses. She escaped slavery and then went back dozens, if not hundreds of times to liberate others. Along the way, she inspired countless more to join the Underground Railroad. We rightly remember Lincoln and the Union soldiers on June 19th, and we remember the faith of this modern Moses. Tubman said, "The Lord told me to take care of my people."

Jesus called the man who had been Legion to a similar task as Moses or Tubman. After his healing, this man begged to follow Jesus, but Jesus sent him back to the very same people who had feared him. Jesus commanded him to “tell [the people] how much God has done for you” (Luke 8:39). The emphasis was on speech.

Moses confessed that he was slow of speech and not articulate. Perhaps you, too, feel like you don’t have the words to meet the moment or maybe you are afraid to speak. Hear how God said to Moses, “I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.” (Exodus 4:12). There is somewhere to place your faith.

So what about those villagers in Gerasene? Luke’s narrative moves on but imagine how their story might have continued. I imagine that, in the days immediately after the man’s return, his healing trended on everyone’s social media feeds. But then everyone moved on. Except for a few people who, in the words of Luke in a later story about two disciples on the road to Emmaus, found their “hearts burning within them” (Luke 24:32). Burning like that bush in the wilderness with a message of hope and liberation from the Living God.

I imagine that this fired-up band of believers kept speaking of the wondrous things that God had done and, when their community grew, they encountered resistance. Change gets our attention. People fear words of transformation, and I imagine the tragic irony that the man known as Legion was re-demonized by his own people.

When this fear campaign mounted, the opposition would appeal to the powers to send in military force against their citizens. To send a legion not of demons but actual Roman soldiers. I wonder, did the threat of violence douse the believers’ fiery spirits like icy water? Or, did they put their faith in God so that the Spirit burned even hotter within them as they spoke of God’s love and grace? Where was their faith?

I understand that fear is real. Speaking up can bring reprisal. As a young disciple told us a few weeks ago, courage is not the absence of fear but doing the right thing when you are afraid. What are courageous words? Ocean Vuong, a Vietnamese-American writer, echoed the burning bush story by saying that, before entering a temple in his ancestral homeland, he takes off his shoes to signify holy ground. He adds, “I want to take off the shoes of my voice” as a metaphor for respectful speech. He says, “We often tell our students: ‘The future is in your hands.’ But the future is actually in your mouth. You have to articulate the world you want to live in.”

Words create worlds. As I grew up, I heard boys talk about pleasure as conquest: “I bagged her. I owned it. I went in there, guns blazing, dropping bombs.” The truth is that much of what’s said in our culture creates the conditions for revenge or violence. If we want forgiveness and compassion, it starts with what we say. If we altered our language, where would our future be? Where would we grow towards? Where is our faith? God said to Moses, “I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.” Jesus said, “Tell the people how much God has done for you.” Or perhaps sing!

Peter Scholtes was a Catholic priest serving at St. Brendan’s parish on the South Side of Chicago in 1966. He wanted a hymn that a multicultural, interracial gathering of youth could sing, yet he couldn’t find one! So, one afternoon, Father Scholtes sat down and penned:

We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord ... And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.

May it be so in our time, for God is still inspiring us with burning words of love. Let us pray:

O love divine, you are the maker of life
and giver of freedom. Throughout history,
you have called leaders through signs
of awe and wonder. You have empowered
speakers with words and a burning desire
to bring justice and make peace.

We thank you for prophets,
from Moses to Harriet Tubman,
from Abe Lincoln to James Baldwin,
from Ella Baker to Ocean Vuong,
for Jesus who is prophet and priest.
And we thank you for language
that joins us in the chorus,
that we too lift every voice and sing.

We pray for courage despite our doubts,
for faith despite our fears.
We pray for our leaders,
those elected and those with power,

that they would offer words
of compassion and humility,
and act with mercy and self-control.

We pray for our world, which is a
fragile place of beauty and bombs.
We pray for all those tormented,
whether by legions of sickness or soldiers.
We ask you to bring healing, calm storms,
and cure our warring madness.

May we take off the shoes of our voices.
In a world of beauty and bombs,
may our common sorrow and fear
produce an ember burning in our hearts
to depolarize and defragment us,
that we find ourselves on the holy ground
where faith lives in love and makes us
one in the spirit. In Christ's name, amen.