



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Surprising God

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, June 19, 2022

The Second Sunday After Pentecost

Based on Isaiah 65:1-9; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen

So, let me get this straight. It's Father's Day, a beloved day in our nation's cultural tradition, and it's Juneteenth, our newest National holiday, which commemorates the emancipation of enslaved people in the United States. And the gospel appointed for this morning? Well, Jesus exorcizes a group of demons and casts them into a herd of swine, which then rush down a steep bank into a lake and drown. Somehow, I don't think I'm going to be able to leave this pulpit without disappointing somebody.

So, let's go back to the very beginning of the ministry of Jesus so that I can try to put all of this into perspective. Jesus begins by spending forty days in the wilderness facing temptation. When that ordeal concludes, Jesus walks into the synagogue in his own hometown of Nazareth and reveals himself as the Messiah. The people of Nazareth are so outraged by this assertion that they run him straight out of town.

So, Jesus makes his way north to Capernaum, a fishing town on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, a town that becomes Jesus' second home. Archaeologists believe this is probably where Peter's family lived. Capernaum is the virtual basecamp of the disciples and the place from which Jesus chooses Peter, Andrew, and Matthew. And, it's Jewish territory.

- In Capernaum, Jesus heals the servant of a Roman Centurion.
- In Capernaum, Jesus heals a paralytic who is lowered through a roof.
- In Capernaum Jesus heals Simon Peter's mother-in-law of a deadly fever.
- In Capernaum, Jesus teaches and heals in the synagogue and preaches the "I am the Bread of Life" sermon.

But in today's gospel lesson, Jesus leaves the safety of the Jewish territory of Capernaum, which is located in the west, and goes to the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee—which is, by the way, technically a lake, and not genuinely a "sea." (Information for your continuing edification.) The eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, among the Gerasenes, is Gentile territory. This is the land of the non-Jews, the Gentiles, all the ritually "unclean" people.

The people who call this side of the lake "home" are culturally much more Greek than Semitic. Yet Jesus feels compelled to go to these people to teach and, yes, to heal them as well. This is significant because this is his first mission to people who are not primarily Jewish; and so we see, right from the very

beginnings of his ministry, that Jesus is going to make his work be about everybody. His ministry is going to include everyone.

On this journey to the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, a strong storm comes up, and Jesus calms the wind and the waves using the same language used in exorcisms, which causes his disciples to ask, “Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water and they obey him?” Well, the disciples get their answer in today’s gospel lesson.

Just as soon as Jesus steps off the boat in the east, he is confronted by a man possessed by demons. The demons are so powerful within him that the man has been kept under guard, and yet still he breaks the shackles used to bind him and escapes, naked, into the wild. He shouts at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?” Jesus asks for his name, and he answers that his name is “Legion.” Jesus then allows the demons, who beg to enter the herd of swine nearby, to do so.

Later the townspeople who witnessed all this see the man, in his right mind, fully clothed, sitting at the feet of Jesus. And that is precisely when their fears peak, prompting them to ask Jesus to leave town as soon as possible. When the man from whom the demons had departed asks Jesus if he can leave with him, Jesus refuses and instructs the man to “return home and declare how much God has done for you.” “So,” Luke says, “he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.” Here we see the power of Jesus extending beyond the territorial boundaries of Judaism. Here we see the power of Jesus to heal and to transform not only individuals but the powers and principalities as well!

The Reverend Sam Wells writes, “His name is *Legion*. This name is the key to the story. Everything begins to make sense when we allow the meaning of ‘legion’ to dictate the shape of the story. It’s a story about Rome whose *legions* possessed Israel. Israel lived in internal exile. Why are there so many pigs? Because pigs had one purpose only, to feed the bands of Roman recruits. As always, exegetes obsessed by Jewish custom or eschatological expectation or charismatic gifts or psychological states may miss the highly political significance of what the Gospel writer is recording. This is a coded identification of Jesus as liberator.”ⁱ

No hearer of this story in the ancient world would have been able to miss its meaning. Jesus is taking on the evil powers of this world—the whole world. Winds and waves and demonic spirits, literally and figuratively, all of them fall before his authority.

Dr. Catherine Meeks, Executive Director of the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing, said some very interesting things in a recent online conversation with Canon Stephanie Spellers about Juneteenth (Their conversation is available on our [website](#), and I commend it to you.) When these two African American women are talking about racial healing, Dr. Meeks points out that before you can come to any kind of “healing” or “reconciliation,” “First, you have to believe *everyone* is a person. And we have some work to do in that area. We need to interrogate ourselves regarding the things which are difficult.” What a hard, and sad truth, that we need to begin there.

Now demonic possession is a controversial topic. You won’t find lots of sermons focusing on it in Episcopal churches. We apparently are not all that worried about demons, but we do worry—and we should worry—about the products of evil.

This year, Juneteenth comes only some 40 days after a white gunman murdered ten black people at a supermarket in Buffalo, in what *The New York Times* called “one of the deadliest racist massacres in recent U.S. history.” So, what had the victims done to raise the ire of their assailant? The victims of this

slaughter were doing their weekly grocery shopping. They were just people going to the store, doing one of the most ordinary things any of us can do.

That, and they were doing it while being Black.

- Is not racism a form of demonic possession?
- Is it not a way of being captured by an evil that holds us as slaves and directs us in unholy ways?
- Is not our nation's captivation with powerful anti-personnel weapons a form of demonic possession?
- Are we not captured by an evil that holds us as hostages and deludes us into thinking our so-called freedoms, represented in the unregulated ownership of military-grade weapons by civilians, supersedes the innocent lives of men, women, and, increasingly, our children?
- When we are, one day, called into account (as we all must be), how will we justify this? How will we explain that we just kept letting it happen?

The Almighty God, speaking through the words of the prophet Isaiah, said, "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. 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; a people who provoke me to my face continually."

- How can we explain that on *this* Father's Day, some children are no longer alive to make homemade cards for their daddies?
- And how can we explain that some daddies are no longer alive to gush over those handmade cards from their children?
- How can we explain that some African-American mothers and grandmothers are no longer alive to celebrate this new Juneteenth holiday because they were murdered in their neighborhood grocery store because of their race?

If you have ever wondered, this, this is what it is to be possessed by the demonic.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "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. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."

Matt Haig has written a New York Times bestseller titled *The Midnight Library*.[#] It's a captivating book about an imaginary library located between life and death. The premise of the novel is that you can check out books from the Midnight Library that enable you to live as if you had done things differently, to pursue alternative lives based on different decisions. Each book in the library contains a different life, a different possible world in which you made different choices that play out in an infinite number of ways, affecting everyone you know (as well as people you don't).

- What would have happened if you had married this person instead of that person? What would have happened if you had stayed single?
- What would have happened if you had seriously pursued your athletic or musical or artistic interests?
- What would have happened if you had gone to graduate school or taken a different career path?

The most important book in the library, the book to be consulted before choosing these different lives, is titled *The Book of Regrets*. It's a compilation of every action you've taken that you deeply regret. Of course, there are some things for which we hold regret that are not actually our responsibility. And some of the good things we might hope to do can have unfortunate, even catastrophic, consequences. And some of our poorer decisions may have unintended consequences that lead to good outcomes. Life is,

indeed, a mystery; but it's interesting to think about the regrets we hold and how we might be freed of them.

The Midnight Library is an intriguing read; and for days after reading it, I found myself replaying big decisions in my life and wondering what would have happened if I had made different decisions. Would things have gone better? Would I have fewer regrets? And what might be some of the unanticipated consequences of a different life? What prized memories or relationships or accomplishments could be lost in a different reality?

In the real world in which we live, however, there is no library with alternative lives for us to choose. We are granted this one precious life with all of its myriad possibilities. We are given the power of the Holy Spirit, and we are given human agency to help create a remarkable world or to contribute to its depravity.

Evangelist Luis Palau said, "God is not disillusioned with us. God never had any illusions about us to begin with."ⁱⁱⁱ No, God is not surprised by our mental illness, our racism, our anger, our fear towards our fellow human beings, or our half-hearted faith. God never had any illusions to begin with regarding the human condition.

But wouldn't it be really interesting to surprise God with our courage, our reconciling hearts, our passion and acceptance towards our fellow human beings, and our resilient and open faith? Wouldn't it be truly wonderful to surprise God with our faith, our hope, and our love?

Amen.

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ⁱ The Reverend Samuel Wells, *Christian Century*, June 15th, 2004, as quoted in Synthesis, Yr C, Proper 7, June 24th, 2007.

ⁱⁱ Matt Haig, *The Midnight Library*, Viking Press, (an imprint of Penguin Random House, LLC), c. 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ Luis Palau, Synthesis, Year C, June 24, 2001.