

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost- September 23, 2007

Scripture lessons: Genesis 12:1-5 & Mark 4:35-5:21

THE OTHER SIDE

Each Sunday morning we gather here to worship God. Each time we do, we listen for God by reading and reflecting on the Scriptures. The more we understand of the background and context of the Bible passages we hear the better off we are in trying to understand what God's saying to us through them now. That's as true of our second Scripture reading for today as of almost any other Biblical story I know.

Our first Scripture actually provides the deep background for it. In Genesis, chapter 12, God promises Abram, "I will make of you a great nation . . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (verses 2-3). To assist in this, all Abram has to do, God says, is "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (verse 1).

God says *nothing* about which land it will be, but Abram still says yes. He gathers his wife, Sarah, his nephew, Lot, and some other family members to hit the road. Perhaps for the only time in history a husband and wife travel, the wife asks her husband, "Where in the world are we?" and he answers, "God only knows."

The land God shows them turns out to be Canaan, and a little later in verse 7 God tells Abram, "To your offspring I will give *this* land." We fast forward hundreds of years to the time of Joshua who has entered Canaan with some of Abram's descendants. God tells Joshua to assure his people that, "By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites" (Joshua 3:10). Those groups come to be known as the "seven nations of Canaan".

In Jesus' time and beyond, Abram's descendants celebrate the fact that the land of those peoples has become their land. In Acts 13, verse 19, for example, Paul as a descendant of Abram in speaking to fellow descendants of Abram in the synagogue at Antioch, says, "(God) had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, (and) gave (Israel) their land as an inheritance"- which brings us to Jesus in today's second Scripture.

"On that day, when evening had come, (Jesus) said to (his disciples), "Let us go across to the other side" (Mark 4:35). That sounds very plain and simple, but it's not. Where is this "other side" Jesus wants them to go to?

In their day it's known as the Decapolis. It's the territory where the "seven nations of Canaan" went after they'd been driven out by Abram's descendants. Their culture in the Decapolis has developed in ways very different from Israel's. It features pagan cults that glorify sex, violence, and wealth. Jews in Jesus' day consider the Decapolis a dark, evil, and enemy territory to which they do NOT go.

It doesn't help that it's also a center of Roman power. Rome keeps a legion of 6000 soldiers there who are always ready to help reinforce Rome's oppression of the Jews next door. So when Jesus calmly says to his disciples, "Let's go across to the other side," they can't be happy about it. They're upset and confused by it, not knowing what he's up to.

Jesus has been going around Galilee preaching that the kingdom of God is at hand. Everyone in Galilee knows that the coming of the kingdom is for their sake, for the sake of God's chosen people, Israel. But what does Jesus think? Does he think the kingdom's for those pagans on the other side, too? Does he think they're among the whole world that's supposed to be blessed through Abram? Does he think the other side is somehow God's side, too? What's he up to?

They get into the boat to cross over and, wouldn't you know it, a terrible storm kicks up. The disciples are terrified, but they're not surprised. They probably think, "Look, we're not supposed to be doing this. We're not supposed to be going to the other side. This is what we get for it!"

Their boat's being swamped, they're afraid they're going to die, but what's Jesus doing? He's asleep in the back of the boat. In a panic, the disciples wake him and ask, "Teacher, don't you care that we're dying out here?" Jesus says to the wind and the sea, "Peace! Be still!" The storm stops and Jesus asks his disciples if they still have no faith. Why have they been so afraid? The disciples wonder, "Who *is* this guy?"

They continue to the other side. In Galilee, Jesus' ministry has been drawing great crowds. When they enter the Decapolis in the country of the Gerasenes, one lone man greets them and he's full of demons. He's so out-of-control that he's been banished to live among the tombs. Night and day, day and night, he howls and bruises himself with stones. Jesus says to the demon, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" The demon calls Jesus the "Son of the Most High God" and pleads with him to go away- "Jesus, don't torment me." Jesus asks him, "What's your name?" and the demon replies, "My name is Legion; for we are many."

This story is loaded with significance. Remember that there's a Roman legion based in the Decapolis. This encounter with a demon named Legion signals the full range of powers, both spiritual and imperial, that Jesus confronts here. But the demons named Legion recognize Jesus' power and want nothing to do with him. They beg him not to send them out of the Decapolis. They want permission instead to enter a nearby herd of pigs. How strange is that?

It's very strange to us, but not as much so when we realize the meaning of pigs in this context. For the Jews of Jesus' day, pigs are unclean. The Torah commands that pigs neither be raised nor eaten. But the seven nations of Canaan *revered* pigs. The Romans, too, had the head of a wild boar as a symbol of their military legions. The Romans had tried to force Jews to eat pigs when they first had conquered Israel two centuries earlier. They had slaughtered anyone who refused.

For demons named Legion in possession of a Gerasene man to go into pigs is a powerful symbol in this story. It places Jesus face-to-face with unclean spirits and with animals that his own people consider both unclean and symbolic of Roman domination. In other words, it's a showdown. What will happen next?

Mark 5, verse 13 says, "So (Jesus) gave (the demons) permission. And the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and was drowned in the sea." What in the world does *that* mean? *It means that any demonic power attached to pagan culture or to Roman domination and oppression ultimately will prove to be no match for the power of Jesus.*

Jesus sets the demon-possessed man free. Word of his healing spreads quickly, but the response to it is also strange. People see that the man who'd been so tormented is now completely well, but instead of rejoicing in that fact, they're *afraid*. They beg Jesus to leave, and why?

I suppose it's because as far as they're concerned *he* is from "the other side". He has amazing power, but he's *not* one of them. Maybe he'll end up using his power against them, so why take a chance on this outsider? Leave us alone, Jesus.

Jesus is ready to do as they ask, but as he gets back into his boat the man he's healed begs to go with him. For such a long time, his life in the Decapolis has been a complete and utter misery. Jesus has given him a brand new one, but now his own people turn around and tell Jesus to leave. You can see why he wants to go along.

Yet Jesus tells him no. This seems strange, too. In Galilee, Jesus has been telling people, "Come, follow me and be my disciple." But to this man, so desperate to follow him, Jesus says, "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you." Apparently, the man does exactly that *and . . .* to great effect.

It seems certainly so, because later in the next chapter, after being back in Galilee for awhile, Jesus returns to the other side. He goes back to the Decapolis with his disciples and receives a completely different greeting from before. The first time he'd been met by a lone and demon-ridden man. This time Mark says, "When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the

marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed” (6:54-56).

Before they had seen what Jesus could do, but had begged him to leave. Now they bring all their sick to him and beg for them even to touch his cloak. What has changed?

One man has told his story. One man everyone knew and had stayed away from because he was so crazy told the story of how Jesus, this man from the other side, had changed his life. Everyone could see how much he’d changed. They listened and finally took to heart his story of how it had happened, even if it meant changing their minds about somebody from the other side. Eventually, they could hear it from him because he was one of them. Jesus must have understood this from the start which is why he had said, “Stay here with your people and tell your story.”

Jesus is sharp. He finds all sorts of ways to get the good news out, different ways that fit for different people. Take this example. When he’d been back in Galilee after his first trip to the Decapolis, 5000 people had gathered one day to hear him teach. The time grew late and his disciples came to Jesus with concern for the crowd’s hunger. Jesus blessed five loaves of bread and two fish and had his disciples set them before the people. It turned out there was more than enough food for everyone. The disciples ended up collecting twelve baskets of leftovers.

The significance of that number twelve wasn’t lost on the disciples or anyone else in that Jewish crowd. Twelve was the number of Israel’s original tribes. Twelve signified God’s chosen people. Twelve baskets of leftovers from that hungry, but now satisfied crowd signaled to them once more God’s abundant care, compassion, and provision for his specially chosen ones.

Yet now Jesus is back on the other side in the Decapolis. Everyone brings their sick to him for healing. A little later, 4000 people gather to hear him teach. They’re with Jesus for *three* days without anything to eat, but Jesus’ disciples say nothing at all about this crowd’s hunger. In Galilee, they had come to Jesus with that concern after one day, but in the Decapolis three days pass and the disciples seem not to notice.

Why this difference? In Galilee, they had been with their people. In the Decapolis, they’re on the other side. But Jesus says, “I have compassion on this crowd. We need to feed them, too” (Mark 8:2-3). Jesus feeds the crowd of 4000, again with only a few loaves of bread and some fish. This time, his disciples gather up *seven* baskets of leftovers.

The significance of that number also is not lost on the disciples or on any other Jews who later hear this story. Remember that Jesus and his disciples are now in the land of the seven nations of Canaan. With these baskets Jesus is saying, “Look, twelve baskets left over in Galilee meant God’s abundant and never-ending care for his chosen people Israel. Seven baskets left over here in the Decapolis mean God’s abundant and never-ending care for everyone on the other side, too.”

Jesus is clear that the gospel of God’s kingdom come near is good news for all. He works to find every way he can to get the good word out to people in whatever way they’ll hear it. To each of us today who’ve heard it, he says the same thing he said to his first man in the Decapolis, “Go and tell your story.” He says to us, “Tell the story of what God’s kingdom come near has meant to *you*.”

We don’t have to try to tell somebody else’s story. We just need to tell our own. Tell of the ways that God’s care, compassion, and healing have come to us, personally. Tell of the demons that God has freed us from. Our stories might not have the same drama of the man’s in the Decapolis, but they each have their own power, especially if we tell them simple, straight, and true. It’s power that God can use to bring others into the Kingdom.

We can tell our story to our people, the ones who are like us, those who can probably hear it best from us. And we can join Jesus on the other side, too, to let everyone know that God’s care, compassion, and healing truly are for *all*. Amen.