

Proper VII Year C 2019

In the beginning... not at the very beginning when God made the moon and the stars... but at our beginning... at the moment within the grand evolutionary sweep of the process of creation that humankind became conscious... when the so-called Homo Sapiens... 'knowledgeable man'... became the cognitive superior in the animal kingdom... We became the thinking animal... able to reason... able to empathize... the questions of life became more complex... no longer the simple questions of existence of what, and how... but questions of why, and what for... and the ability of discernment... Our creation myth calls it the knowledge of good and evil; knowledge that is godlike, the editor of Genesis puts it... this new species, one that possesses a powerful memory... and the ability to make reasoned choices.... and knowledge.... Knowledge, perhaps the most powerful force on earth... the human species, the thinking animal has used this knowledge to conquer civilizations, extend our life expectancy... to subdue the planet for our purposes... This power has been one of countless blessings, and it has also been our undoing.

This coming of age of the human, this transition of our becoming a conscious, thinking animal has been and still is difficult for us... We have the

ability to accomplish marvels, and we also have the power to inflict great harm.... We, through the imagination, have the capacity to perceive beauty... and we also have the capacity for violence... Why this stunning dichotomy? This schizophrenia, as it were. These two natures... The church in its tradition calls the dark side of our nature sin. But it is who we are... and we are still becoming.... still living into this paradoxical gift of being human.

In the course of our evolution though, we didn't cease being creatures of instinct... we didn't cease being animals... While we have the capacity to reason and empathize, and invent, and calculate, and create... we still bear deep in our collective DNA our animal survival instincts... and at the heart of those instincts is fear... flight or fight, to put it in anthropological terms... In the course of our very survival as a species we learned to fear the other..... We had to protect the tribe at all costs... Fear creates adrenaline... empowers us for defense... or for offense... there was a time when fight or flight served us well many millennia ago, maybe, but we haven't been able to shake that instinct.... And it is becoming more and more clear that fear is doing us in.... fear pervades our social, economic and political systems... fear motivates... fear sells... Fear and knowledge are an insidious combination... and when technology is added to the equation.... Well, we see the horror all around us.

The purpose of scripture in every religion that I know about is to teach us to mature into our higher nature... The editors of Proverbs admonish us to lay aside immaturity and live... Perhaps it is our destiny to out think, to imagine our way beyond our primordial instincts... scripture was and is to teach us to integrate our godlike powers for the greater good, our instincts notwithstanding.... The writers of Hebrew scripture name the problem consistently and insistently... In the law and the prophetic literature they name the fear of the stranger as the heart of our undoing... I'm no literalist when it comes to the bible, but I believe the scribes of scripture mean literally that to welcome the stranger is at the heart of our practice of faith. They persistently tell us that we are to welcome and embrace the Xenos, (Xenos, the Greek word for stranger from which we get the word Xenophobia, fear of stranger) We are taught to embrace the stranger as the human, as the humane way to survive and thrive... that the ways of fight or flight have run their course... outlived their usefulness; and are in fact harmful... these writers speak consistently of welcoming the resident alien, the immigrant... the stranger.... They speak of it as a practice, not an idea, but a practice as the means by which we live into our higher nature... Our godlikeness.... Philosophy and theology, products of the thinking mind, are all well and good, but it is practice to which the sages of our lore point us.

Our story today in Luke is a story about fear... more a fable than story; that's Luke's style.... A fable about welcoming, embracing the stranger as the means to Shalom.... That's a rich word... Shalom, salaam in Arabic...In English it means peace... but it means much more... It means the peace that is beyond understanding... It is peace of mind that comes with well-being and dignity... Shalom in short is what salvation is all about. It is the experience, bordering on the mystical, that all things are well... It is the experience, I imagine, that God had when God looked upon creation and called it good.

Indeed, our passage today is set in the context of a creation story. In the passage just before the one we just read, Jesus calms the sea in a storm... a gloss of the creation story in Genesis when God moved over the deep bringing the cosmos into being out of chaos... Jesus calms the sea, and then steps onto land... land that is outside the borders of Israel... and he encounters the strangest of strangers... a man possessed by many demons (possessed by a legion he tells Jesus... a pun hard to miss by the first century audience occupied by a Roman legion)... He is a man living in a graveyard... a man so fearsome that he is shackled and cast out of his community... For the Jewish listener to this tale, this man is the ultimate outcast... He is possessed, he lives among the dead, he is a gentile (living among pigs), he is in the company of swineherds... he is the quintessential

untouchable.... He is the one whom we must fight, or from whom we would take flight... And Luke tells us that Jesus has compassion on this outcast and sends the demons into a herd of swine back into the sea, back into the chaos from which they came.... And the man is restored, returned to his right mind... returned to shalom... and all the townspeople, we are told, are afraid... fear is not gone in this fable, but it has lost its power. And the moral premise here is that Jesus doesn't see the man as outcast. He sees him as victim.

Brothers and sisters, this is a cautionary tale of how we overcome the fear that is within us... how it is disempowered and transformed.... And it is not some esoteric knowledge... It is the simple practice that the scribes and the prophets have held up for us over the centuries... that to welcome and embrace and to love the other... the other who is outcast; the other who is victim... that to love the outcast and the isolated and the beat down is to save ourselves from the fear that smolders in our DNA; fear that ramifies and infects our communities... In God's economy shalom, peace, salvation are restored not just for the one embraced, but also for the one who embraces... Salvation, Shalom has everything to do with the community, the whole... It is never a reality for the individual alone.

This gospel life into which we have been baptized is a way of life that disables the fear, and the hatred that fear engenders.... Fear and hatred that has haunted us since time immemorial.... This gospel at its heart is not something one learns in a catechism... It is a practice of loving the stranger, the outcast... a practice of restoring the lost to dignity... It is about taking care of the marginalized... It is about loving our neighbor as we love ourselves... That is how we love God Jesus reminds us...that is how we muster the courage to call the world good.... in practice. So I'll say it again, salvation is not a personal matter. Salvation is about the restoration of community in which there are no outcasts... in which there are strangers no more.

Who are our outcasts?... who are our beat down?... who are our demon possessed? The homeless crack addict.... The drunk... the affluent heroin user... the black teenager from the project... the mentally ill... The immigrant children separated from their parents by the U.S. government now incarcerated in concentration camps along our border. If ever there were a gospel issue for the church; this is it.... the Muslim refugee... the transgendered soldier.... Brothers and sisters, we as Christian folk are called to invite them out of the graveyards of their exile... we are called to invite them to our table... We are called to bear shalom to our broken world... We are their advocates.... Because salvation depends on

it.....And though the demons we face are legion... **We will not fear**, because we are heirs as Paul puts it... heirs of the promise.... Heirs of sacred shalom... It just takes practice.