

“The Stilling of The Storms”

The Rev Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages
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1 Kings 19:9b-13

Mark 4:35-5:20

“As the Gerasenes approached Jesus,
they noticed the one who had been demon-oppressed
was sitting clothed and coherent – the “Division” was gone.
But they became frightened.”

Mark 5:15-17

Let us pray... O God,
Help us not to be side-tracked by some sensational, glittering evil,
while failing to recognize the mundane sins of institutional injustice.

Amen

The original Gospel lesson I wanted to share with you this morning
was to be much longer.

But it would have been more difficult to make the connection
with our liturgical drama today
without being distracting or possibly conflicting.

Ancella Bickely wrote the scripts for the dramatic monologues
that were originally presented here last fall
for our “Sacred Conversation on Race” event.

In our early discussions about this project,
she had expressed this very concern – especially about how Gabriel
would be perceived.

So, I want to be very clear how I believe these stories relate to each other.

Having given you a synopsis of the events of Jesus’ calming of the storm at sea
and his initial encounter on the far shore

with that spiritually troubled person,
I wanted to focus on Jesus’ confrontation with ‘Legion’
and the Gerasene townspeople.

This is a fraction of that story that yet contains the whole story
even the essential Gospel message itself of personal salvation
and social transformation – of liberation from oppression.

It is like a fraction or rather something called a “fractal” –
which is a mathematical term.

And fractals *‘are geometric patterns that repeat on ever-shrinking scales’*
which means that the tiniest part is a smaller version of the whole thing.

Another detail that I just happened to learn about fractals
is that they are a significant concept evident in African art.

Willard, p.2

Ohio State U. professor and author Ron Eglash found a relationship between African art and this geometric concept called fractals which can be found in *'[m]any natural objects, like ferns, tree branches, and lung bronchial systems... as well as... swirling patterns produced by computer graphics, [used] for modeling in biology, geology, and other natural sciences. In [his book] African Fractals, Eglash discusses fractal patterns that appear in widespread components of ... African culture, from braided hairstyles... to... the design of homes and settlements.'*

And given this interesting side bar about 'fractals' and African culture, my point is that – Jesus and Gabriel both suffer unjustly when confronting institutional evil just as other heroes of liberation have throughout human history.

The message of liberation is accompanied by the reality of oppression and exclusion in both the stories of Gabriel and Jesus. Both are agents of change and both face a fearful majority who oppose and exclude them.

And this pattern found in these two incidental stories is reflected in the larger, "macro" story of Jesus' trial and crucifixion which itself is a parable for people throughout history who have taken a stand for freedom often to become nameless victims. And not just in history, but even now in current events.

This is at the heart of what's happening in the Arab Spring , especially Syria, and – to some extent, Occupy Wall Street movements around the world. And perhaps this unrest goes further back to when the people of Iran protested rigged national elections in 2009.

Or earlier to 2007 when there were anti-government protests in Burma – called Myanmar, because of fuel prices that soared more than 60%.

Or more than 20 years ago with the Beijing Spring of Tian An Min Square and the Fall of the Berlin Wall took place.

Or 50 years or so ago, with the Civil Rights Movement in this country.

And so, just as a 'fractal' is a representative pattern of a whole structure, so these events in history are parables of the Christ story– and vice versa.

In Jesus' day, he lived under an empire – the Roman Empire, which exercised military and economic domination over his homeland.

Contemporary scholarship tells us that the Jewish Governor of Galilee, Herod Antipas strove to win favor with the Romans by expanding his revenues.

Willard, p. 3

He did this by taxing the fishing trade of the Sea of Galilee
which put pressure on the landed people of that region
who were already heavily taxed –
and now denied access to do any fishing on the side
as a source of extra income to just get by.

Though it is not clear what the people of Gera-sa' in the region
across from Antipas' territory had to deal with
regarding their own economic issues,
Jesus' encounter with the disturbed man and
and the subsequent destruction of that huge herd of swine
would have had a major economic impact on them –
as well as being an environmental catastrophe,
which by itself could explain why they asked Jesus to leave.

But the Gerasenes react oddly in their discovery that
the demon-oppressed person was now clothed and rational.

Why had there been no celebration at all –
especially when there had been considerable efforts in the past
to subdue this man, even with chains.

Instead, they reacted with fear.

I have wondered if this person served some kind of purpose for them –
perhaps as a 'boogey-man' to frighten people.

The name 'Legion' is a clear reference to the Roman army which was organized
as groups of soldiers called legions.

I used the word 'Division' in my paraphrase of this story
which could be seen as an example of a large military unit
or represent the bipolar aspect of this person who was
alternately threatening and cringing.

What parallels to these stories might we draw with our own time?

Since the 9/11 tragedies, some of our leaders openly
sought a military solution to the threat of Islamic fanaticism.

The Islamic terrorist became the new 'communist'
as a threat to American society.

And the possibility that terrorists might sneak across the Mexican border
led to efforts to build a wall and man the border –
even with militias to stop the flow of illegal immigration.

The Mexican immigrant – who had been coming back and forth
across the border for many years to follow migrant farm-work
became a new boogey man – a new target for blame.

Willard, p.4

It would seem that this is an example of how power brokers manipulate a situation by using “division” to keep groups apart and at odds with each other over limited resources and use such a group as a scapegoat as a diversion whenever there’s something wrong – especially with the economy.

In his time, Gabriel stood to confront the evil spirit of human slavery and sought to rescue his people by organizing an armed revolt.

It was feared that his plan was to massacre all the white people in the city of Richmond, VA, but there is an exceptionally long list of white allies including Methodists, Quakers, and the French – which makes me think that killing people was not his goal, just something they were prepared to do.

But it seems more likely that Gabriel’s plan was to start fires as a diversion in order to capture Gov. James Monroe by force as necessary.

Then, they would get him to rescind those laws supporting slavery and start making changes to improve economic and social opportunities for African-Americans;

And finally they would all sit down at table with the Governor and have dinner together!

However, a storm prevented that insurrection from taking place and Gabriel was executed along with 35 co-conspirators – just as Jesus would die.

God was not in the storm, neither was God in the earthquake or fire in the story about Elijah, one of God’s great prophets and fighters who could even call down fire from heaven as well as put false prophets to the sword.

There is a lot of violence associated with this man of God, yet peace for Elijah was not to be found in earthquake, wind, or fire – it was in a gentle breeze.

When I think of what the people of Syria are having to go through now and how peaceful protests are giving way to armed rebellion – like what took place in Libya and may yet take place in Egypt, I am sad to think some struggles must come to the shedding of blood.

But such strife can never end through violence – always, always, always it can only be concluded by forgiveness and love.

Peace can only come about through justice – that is to say: through “just us” sitting down together and working things out as equals with mutual respect.

Willard, p.5

And that is love – that is what the Beloved Community will look like,
God's Kingdom come true on Earth as it is in Heaven.
Even if that Beloved Community is never achieved,
there is a reward in just being part of it – it is its own reward.

We see this principle at work in the lives of people
like Jesus, Gabriel, Martin Luther King Jr., and others.
Jesus and Gabriel shared a common characteristic of courage on trial,
speaking their truth clearly and confidently,
self-possessed in the knowledge of who they were as persons.
There is no question about who they are or what they oppose –
they are people who are un-divided, un-deflected, un-relenting
in their respective goals for human liberation.

What the Biblical story of Jesus' "stilling of the storms" may represent –
what the quelling of the tempest and of the evil spirit can represent,
is a vision of the possibility for transformation into peace
and that the nature of God is biased for the sake of human liberation.
Even though it is through Christ's extra-ordinary, super-natural powers
that these things are accomplished,
it is in their example for us of courageous confrontation
through transformative, spoken words and commitment even to death
that authentic peace is achieved.

And these stories will serve as guides for generations to come –
alternating with our personal stories
as microcosms or fractals of a larger story of liberation
to instruct a majority about its complicity with institutional evil
and encourage a minority in their ongoing work to be liberated.

So what will it take to 'still the storms' that threaten
Mexican farm-workers who have no unions?
Or gay children who are harassed to the point of suicide?
Or seniors caught in a for-profit healthcare system?

What will it take to still the lingering storm of racism
against African-Americans in a fearful American society?

What will it take to still the storms in our own lives –
not simply to placate or even achieve victory over them,
but to transform them?

Willard, p.6

Diane Nash – a leader of student Civil Rights actions

like the luncheon counter sit-ins and the Freedom Bus rides,

*[of the 1960s who could well have been among those these days
in Tahrir Square in Cairo or on Wall Street, New York when she said,]*

*"We are a bunch of children. We're nice children, bright and idealistic,
but we are children and we are weak.*

We have no police force, no judges, no cops, no money."

Years later, Nash was quoted by author David Garrow in Bearing the Cross:

"If people think that it was Martin Luther King's movement,

then today they -- young people -- are more likely to say,

'Gosh, I wish we had a Martin Luther King here today to lead us.'

... If people knew how that movement started,

then the question they would ask themselves is,

'What can I do?' "

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1316/is_n5_v30/ai_20588853/?tag=content;col1

What can you do? What can we do?

What can God through us?

Amen

*Our scripture lesson today from 1 Kings 19:9b-13
is about listening for God in the midst of life's storms.*

9b While Elijah was on Mount Sinai, the LORD asked,
"Elijah, why are you here?"

10 He answered, "LORD God All-Powerful,
I've always done my best to obey you.

But your people have broken their solemn promise to you.
They have torn down your altars and killed all your prophets, except me.
And now they are even trying to kill me!"

11 "Go out and stand on the mountain," the LORD replied.

"I want you to see me when I pass by."

All at once, a strong wind shook the mountain and shattered the rocks.

But the LORD was not in the wind.

Next, there was an earthquake,

but the LORD was not in the earthquake.

12 Then there was a fire,

but the LORD was not in the fire.

Finally, there was a gentle breeze,

13 and when Elijah heard it, he covered his face with his coat.

He went out and stood at the entrance to the cave.

The LORD asked,

"Elijah, why are you here?"

Inspired by Mark 5:7b -17

JESUS SAID,

“YOU, EVIL SPIRIT!

COME OUT OF THIS PERSON!

AND THAT PERSON BEGGED HIM,

“WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO TO ME,

JESUS, SON OF THE MOST HIGH GOD?

I BEG YOU DO NOT TORTURE ME!”

[JESUS QUESTIONED HIM,]

“WHAT IS YOUR NAME?”

AND HE SAID,

“MY NAME IS...

‘LEGION’ – ‘DIVISION’ FOR WE ARE AN ARMY!”

THEN HE FERVENTLY BEGGED JESUS,

“DON’T SEND ME OUT OF THIS REGION!”

NOW, THERE WAS A LARGE HERD OF PIGS ROOTING ABOUT NEARBY,

AND THE EVIL SPIRIT WHIMPERED,

“SEND US TO THE PIGS

SO THAT WE CAN ENTER THEM!”

BUT JESUS SENT THEM AWAY,

AND THE SPIRIT OF OPPRESSION CAME OUT –

TO GO INTO THE PIGS!

AND THE HERD RUSHED HEADLONG

OVER THE STEEP CLIFF INTO THE SEA.

ABOUT 2,000 OF THEM WERE DROWNED

IN THE WATERS.

AND THE HERDSMEN THERE FLED TO TELL EVERYONE

IN THE CITY AND IN THE COUNTRY.

AND THE PEOPLE CAME TO SEE WHAT HAD HAPPENED.

AS THE GERASENES APPROACHED JESUS,

THEY NOTICED THE ONE WHO HAD BEEN DEMON-OPPRESSED

SITTING CLOTHED AND COHERENT –

THE ‘DIVISION’ WAS GONE.

BUT THEY BECAME FRIGHTENED.

THEN, THE HERDSMEN RECOUNTED WHAT THEY SAW

ABOUT THE DEMON-OPPRESSED PERSON AND THE PIGS.

BUT THE GERASENES BEGAN TO INSIST

THAT JESUS LEAVE THEIR LAND.

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

Marianne Williamson

http://skdesigns.com/internet/articles/quotes/williamson/our_deepest_fear/

(A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of "A Course in Miracles", Harper Collins, 1992. From Chapter 7, Section 3)

One thing we can do is like what we are doing today –
to keep learning about our history – our history.
For now, maybe we talk in terms of ‘African-American’ or “Black” history,
but someday let us hope all Americans will embrace these stories
as our history.

And as Christians, may we find ways to oppose evil before it can ever take root
by being quick to welcome the good we encounter in others.

Amen

Another great similarity between these two men is their courage on trial,
speaking their truth clearly and confidently,
they are self-possessed in their personhood.
There is no question about who they are or what they oppose –
they are people who are un-divided, un-deflected, and un-relenting
in their respective goals for human liberation.

Cyberneticist [Ron Eglash](#) has suggested that fractal-like structures are prevalent in [African art](#) and architecture. Circular houses appear in circles of circles, rectangular houses in rectangles of rectangles, and so on. Such scaling patterns can also be found in African textiles, sculpture, and even cornrow hairstyles. ^{[22][38]}

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fractal>

Legacy and honors

Gabriel's rebellion served as an important example of slaves' taking action to gain freedom.

- In 2002 the City of Richmond adopted a resolution to commemorate the 202nd anniversary "of the execution of the patriot and freedom fighter, Gabriel, whose death stands as a symbol for the determination and struggle of slaves to obtain freedom, justice and equality as promised by the fundamental principles of democratic governments of the Commonwealth of Virginia and the United States of America."^[7]
- In the fall of 2006, the Virginia State Conference of the [NAACP](#) requested Gov. [Tim Kaine](#) to pardon Gabriel in recognition of his contributions to the civil rights struggle of African Americans and all peoples.^[7]
- On August 30, 2007, Governor Kaine informally [pardoned](#) Gabriel and his co-conspirators. Kaine said that Gabriel's motivation had been "his devotion to the ideals of the American revolution — it was worth risking death to secure liberty." Kaine noted that "Gabriel's cause — the end of slavery and the furtherance of equality of all people — has prevailed in the light of history", and added that "it is important to

acknowledge that history favorably regards Gabriel's cause while consigning legions who sought to keep him and others in chains to be forgotten."^[8] The pardon was informal because it was posthumous.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabriel_Prosser

Fractals Provide Unusual Theme In Much African Culture And Art

ScienceDaily (July 27, 1999) — COLUMBUS, Ohio -- In everything from braided hairstyles to the design of housing settlements, the geometric structures known as fractals permeate African culture.

In a new book, an Ohio State University scholar examines the unlikely pairing of this mathematical concept and the culture and art of Africa.

"While fractal geometry is often used in high-tech science, its patterns are surprisingly common in traditional African designs," said Ron Eglash, senior lecturer in comparative studies in the humanities. Eglash is author of *African Fractals: Modern Computing and Indigenous Design* (Rutgers University Press, 1999).

Eglash said his work suggests that African mathematics is more complex than previously thought. He also says using African fractals in U.S. classrooms may boost interest in math among students, particularly African Americans. He has developed a Web page to help teachers use fractal geometry in the classroom.

<http://www.cohums.ohio-state.edu/comp/eglash.dir/afactal.htm>

Fractals are geometric patterns that repeat on ever-shrinking scales. Many natural objects, like ferns, tree branches, and lung bronchial systems are shaped like fractals. Fractals can also be seen in many of the swirling patterns produced by computer graphics, and have become an important new tool for modeling in biology, geology, and other natural sciences.

In *African Fractals*, Eglash discusses fractal patterns that appear in widespread components of indigenous African culture, from braided hairstyles and kente cloth to counting systems and the design of homes and settlements.

Other researchers have studied bits and pieces of African mathematics in areas such as art, architecture, and religious practices, but Eglash said this is the first attempt to describe the common theme of fractal geometry among several different African cultures.

"There is no singular 'reason' why Africans use fractals, any more than a singular reason why Americans like rock music," Eglash noted in his book. "Such enormous cultural practices just cover too much social terrain." He began this research in the 1980s when he noticed the striking fractal patterns in aerial photos of African settlements: circles of circular houses, rectangles inside rectangles, and streets branching like trees. Eglash confirmed his visual intuition by calculating the geometry of the arrangements in the photos -- they were indeed fractal.

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/1999/07/990727071229.htm>

