

“Dismissing Demons”

June 19, 2016

Sermon by Leah Fowler, Presbyterian Church in Leonia

1 Kings 19:1-4, 8-15a; Luke 8:26-39

As I begin my sermon, I want to say that three very important things need to happen today. Without ranking them, let me tell you first that I need to honor the presence of children in my sermon. I am hoping to have stories and imagery that children can understand and can take root in their minds, and then go where God leads them. Today is the day we have planned to honor them, and I argued to keep the younger ones in the service rather than send them to the nursery—which creates a challenge for the second thing that needs to happen today: to address the tragedy that happened in Orlando. I do not want to be too descriptive, because young children should not have to bear the burden of violence. That is our jobs as the adults who seek to make the world safe for them. So I ask that you listen between the lines, and know that next week we will continue to honor victims in the LGBTQ and Latino and Latina communities, as we also recognize Pride Sunday. Finally, my job this morning is to bring the scriptures to life according to the Spirit’s movement, and I humbly ask God’s help in that, knowing the task does not end with what I say but with how it takes root in your imaginations and your lives.

In an honest confession before God, Elijah moans, “For I am no better than my ancestors!” He admits, “I have been very zealous before the Lord.” Has Elijah been too zealous, too eager, too on fire? Could we call *him* a religious extremist? We know from the lectionary cycle that earlier, Elijah has killed 450 prophets of Baal, to prove the superiority of the God of Israel. Now, he is afraid: is he afraid of King Ahab? Is he afraid of God? Is he afraid of himself, now that he has seen what he can do?

I have known some children who will put themselves in time-out. They realize they are too angry, or have just hurt someone, or just cannot handle whatever is happening. They know they are not acting as good as they are capable of. So, they put themselves in time-out until they can feel and act better. In this story today, Elijah takes a time out. He realizes he is uncertain he is even doing the right thing. He does not know whether what he is doing makes God truly happy.

Wondering what is coming to him, Elijah falls asleep under the boom tree, ready to quit. God has another plan for him. An angel appears and tells Elijah to stand on the mountaintop, where The Lord will pass by. Elijah waits, while a great wind soars, so strong that it split the mountains around him. But The Lord was not in the wind. Then, there was an earthquake; would the earth swallow Elijah up? But The Lord was not in the earthquake. Next came a fire; but The Lord was not in the fire. And finally, the sound—it says—of sheer silence. Elijah “hears” the silence, wrapping his face in his coatsleeve and standing out at the entrance. God reveals a plan for Elijah, and introduces the idea that Elijah’s prophetic mission must transfer to the next prophet, Elisha. It is time for new leadership.

When our fears take hold of us, we look for God in places where we will not find God. As Elijah looked to the wind, and the earthquake, and the fire for the presence of The Lord, we have also been looking for God’s presence in the aftermath of a terrible event that happened in Orlando last week.

Sometimes, in order to find God, we try to first find that which is *not* of God; we try to find and root out demons. We might point to one thing or another and say, “this is the demon we must get rid of”, just as Jesus got rid of the demons inside the man in Gerasene. Some in this country have looked to Muslims, thinking surely these are the demons we must dismiss. But last night, over 20 people from our church

gathered and witnessed God, or *Allah*, at work in our Turkish Muslim neighbors who came to our church and embraced us with words of peace and friendship, and some really tasty food.

Others in this country have looked to people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender and called them demons. I cannot even bear to read the hateful things some people, who call themselves Christians, have said about my LGBT community. I see the headlines, but I do not click on them. I instead read the stories about groups like the Pansy Patrol, who block hateful demonstrators with huge, colorful flower cutouts, signs that say “You are beautiful; God loves you.” In Pride marches and even at church national conferences, the Pansy Patrol has shielded me from hate. I know they have been active in Orlando this week, drowning out words of hate at funerals with the words of Amazing Grace.

Many of us have looked to one individual, to think that one man contained all the demons that led him to acts of violence. It is difficult not to read every article, trying to figure out what would drive someone to such evil. We will probably never know. Like the Gerasene man, his demons should be called Legion, for they are many. But these demons do not only belong to him. They belong to communities that breed self-hatred and homophobia. They belong to communities that breed racism. They belong to communities that do not protect women from domestic abuse. They belong to a country whose laws protect gun manufacturers and shop owners from liability from the destruction their weapons cause, and make assault rifles easily accessible.

We will never find God in acts of hatred. We will never find God intending the kind violence we saw in Orlando, or in Sandy Hook, or in Charleston. When we find ourselves going to those places of hatred and violence, it is time that we—like Elijah—take a time out. When we let the wind pass, and the earthquake pass, and the fire pass, and allow the kind of silence that can clear our minds, we may find God.

In God, we find a beauty, and a love, and a goodness more powerful than the snarliest of demons. The more we listen for it, the better we will be able to find it in ourselves and discover in others. We find it in the first responders who protected and cared for victims in Orlando. We find it in the friendships made last night at the Interfaith Iftar; such a coming together was a powerful witness and a healing balm in the face of a violence that seeks to divide and destroy.

And this presence of God is something we find when we welcome children and live out our baptismal vows by creating a space of safety and trust where they can come to know God and help them see who God might be calling each one to be. We, as a baptizing community, promise our children the living water offered by Jesus. It is a water in which they are claimed and loved by God their Creator. It is a water in which they are shown forgiveness and mercy through Jesus Christ their Redeemer—and then turn and offer that mercy to others. It is a water that marks them in the Holy Spirit, and helps to show them how God’s call moves within them. These are the waters of life, and they are always with us. Amen.

