

God's Welcome Song

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

2nd Sunday after Pentecost - June 19, 2022

Texts: Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39

SCRIPTURE READING Galatians 3:23-29

This message is particularly powerful to hear today, on Juneteenth, when we celebrate how the news of emancipation and the end of slavery was finally proclaimed everywhere in our country.

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 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.

GOSPEL READING Luke 8:26-39

Jesus and his disciples and set out for the other side of the Sea of Galilee. On the way, a windstorm arose and frightened the disciples; Jesus, however, calmed the sea, to the disciples' amazement.

Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me"—for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

It's the oldest joke in the book: Why did the chicken cross the road? To get to the other side.

Why did Jesus cross the Sea? To get to the other side!

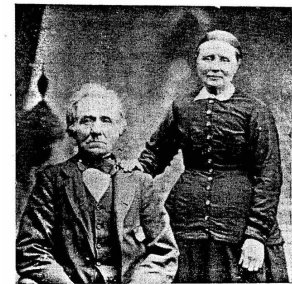
What did he do on the other side? According to the story, he and the disciples sailed over, battling a storm that Jesus quickly dispatched, healed a man, got yelled at by the local people, and headed back home.



Why would Jesus even do this? The man he healed was four times cursed: first, he was a Gentile: shunned by Jews. Second, his people raised pigs: unclean. Third, he was possessed by not one but a whole bunch of demons: wicked. And fourth, he lived in the tombs with the dead: untouchable. Four strikes against him. But Jesus made the dangerous journey to the other side for him. For what? The guy's neighbors didn't even say thank you. They ran Jesus off again.

Why does anybody cross the road, or the ocean? Why get to the other side? Today is a good day to think about this because tomorrow is World Refugee Day. Before I start spouting statistics, let me remind you: We were all once refugees. In Hebrew: "Kolenu hayenu palitim." Literally, we are all people who have escaped, as the Hebrew people escaped both slavery and death in Egypt, in the Exodus. As Joseph and Mary and Jesus escaped to Egypt, when Herod killed all the boy babies. They were refugees, escapees.

But today is also Father's Day. Usually I'd tell stories on my dad but since we're talking refugees, let me tell you about a letter from our great-great-grandfather. In 1866, with his wife and children, he left everything familiar and beloved in Holland, their home country. Of the 100-some people who left together, 20 did not survive the journey. He called it "a hard and heart-grieving trip." One of their children died soon after they landed in America. His wife gave birth to another child, who died within a week. A friend lost at least three children. Why did he cross the ocean? "Not for \$1000" he wrote, "would I make the trip again. But I did not leave Holland thinking America was a paradise but for this reason, if it could be the Lord's will, to earn our bread in an honest way." They were what we'd call today economic refugees.



Remember the boat people in the 1970s, after the fall of Saigon? Nearly 800,000 escaped by boat. Between 2 and 400,000 of them died at sea. I had nearly forgotten that debacle until a few years ago. We were in Washington state, working on a volunteer trail building crew, and became friends with another couple, also volunteers. The wife was

Vietnamese. On the last night of the project, she suddenly opened up and told how, when she was barely more than a toddler, she and her family managed to get on one of the last boats out. It was hugely overcrowded. For four days and nights, they drifted, powerless and terrified, before being rescued. Why did they cross the ocean? For safety.

Safety is what all human beings deserve. Safety is not what all refugees find. Still, many people try to get to the other side. Try to cross the sea. Still, many die. In 2020 there were more than 82M refugees in the world. Add to that those from Afghanistan last year and Ukraine this year, even Yemen. Many are displaced within their own land. It's mind boggling. Tomorrow, on World Refugee Day, remember them. We can try to understand where they're coming from, and why.



And today is Juneteenth. Honestly, until recently, I hadn't heard of this holiday, or why it's been celebrated in the African-American community for so long. Suddenly, it's everywhere. I even got an Uber ad in my email, explaining briefly the end of slavery announced in Texas on June 19, 1865, two years after Lincoln's emancipation proclamation *and* kindly offering to deliver ethnically relevant food to my door. For a price. Really!

The international slave trade actually lasted from 1500 to 1866, the same year my great-great-grandparents crossed the Atlantic to "try to earn their bread in an honest way." Countless Africans were torn from their homes. Many died on the march to the coast. Almost 2 million died on boats. Of those who made it off the boat, one of every five died soon after landing. Why did they cross the ocean? Not by choice! They weren't refugees. And their lives were not safe, then or now.

I know, you probably hear all this on the news. You're wondering, why do I have to hear this at church, too? What does it have to do with my faith or my life? Well, my friend with four little kids and a job connected those dots. With her church, she has befriended a family of Afghan refugees here in Rochester. Our friend Carolyn in Germany - her daughter there took a Ukrainian family into her home. Another friend, Rachael Hanson, pastor at Charter House, is in Estonia this week, visiting her daughter, who left home to become a nun in a tiny monastery there. Following her Savior, and God's call to cross the ocean. To get to the other side, to tell people about Jesus - people for whom Christianity had been all but wiped out under the Soviet regime. Ukrainian refugees are there, too. All of them are acting out of faith.



Why did Jesus cross from heaven to earth? To get to our side. He crossed from Paradise to get to us, as Jesus crossed over the Sea of Galilee to heal the four times unclean man. He crossed over

to our polluted climate, our dirty politics, shameless greed, lawless violence, unclean on so many counts—to show us God *is on our side*. Why did Jesus cross the authorities and break the law, touching untouchable people, healing outcasts, doing it even on the sacred Sabbath? To show us God is on the side of the sick and the sad, those seeking refuge, those needing escape, those bullied and preyed upon.



Why did he cross the line from life to death and back? To show us beyond the shadow of a doubt that there is nothing in heaven or on earth: not hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword - nothing in all creation that can separate us from God's love. There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female. No young or old. No outsider or insider. You belong. Everyone belongs. You are safe. Can we cross to the other side to make others safe, too?

As my great-great-grandfather wrote, "If I think of the loss of my children, America is too small. But without God's will, nothing can happen, not a hair of our head can fall." Faith of our fathers, to be sure. Thanks be to God.

GRATITUDES:

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Hofheinz-Döring, Margret, 1910, *Endless Road*, from **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN.

Prayers:

God of mercy, you came to the other side, to *our* side to welcome us to your side, the side of compassion, the side of safety, for now and for eternity. We are safe in your love; help us extend that safety net to others.

God of freedom, we thank you that the arc of history bends to justice. Help us break through the barriers of racist practice that still divide us and oppress so many.

God of blessing, there are so many ways we damage the beauty of your creation, in our relationships to one another, in our relationships to the earth. We long to do better. Show us how.

God of amazing grace, we thank you for our fathers, grandfathers, ancestors who followed your call in faith, despite loss and hardship. The world is complicated. Let us walk in simple trust.

God of tenderness, we pray for your presence and healing for those dear to us undergoing pain and uncertainty. Remember all who struggle, all who suffer, all who mourn. Remember us all in your kingdom and teach us to pray: Our Father...