

Sermon – Luke 8:26-39
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
2 Pentecost – Year C
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“Courage in Captivity”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. This past week, 107 children came to Grace to travel halfway around the world, not to mention 2,500 years back in time, to learn about Daniel and the courage he and his friends displayed in Babylonian captivity. Our Vacation Bible School was the most well attended in memory, and it was a wonderful week. Catchy tunes (like the ones we sang earlier), fun games, including the creation of marshmallow catapults, great snacks and time spent with friends made for an outstanding VBS. In the midst of all the fun, however, were some fearful things. Daniel, tossed to the lions? Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego tossed into a fiery furnace to die? My favorite moment of the week came when Daniel learned that his three friends were going to be thrown into the fire. In earnest protest Daniel, portrayed exquisitely by your senior pastor, burned the royal proclamation that commanded the idolatrous worship of the golden statue. As I lit the proclamation on fire and held it aloft, one young child, apparently concerned for my safety, shrieked, “Daniel!” There was no real danger, of course. The fire was contained; the happily-ever-after was achieved. The proclamation burned, but Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did not. They lived. They lived, because God was with them. Throughout the week, we learned that when things change, when you need help, when you’re afraid, when you’re lonely, and – finally – when you’re thankful, God is with you.

2. The lessons learned throughout VBS were both pertinent and easily applicable to daily life. The problem, for the grown-ups among us, is that our daily lives, our world situations, do not seem so neatly and easily solved. Today we encounter a man in the country of the Gerasenes. He is unnamed, but his oppressor is not. His possessor is named Legion, for he is many. The man is left naked, shackled, bereft of self. The most his neighbors can do, the most they want to do, is keep the man away from them. He is alone except for his demons, his challenges, the evil that pervades him from without. While you may have never been possessed by a demon, you know – we all know – what it means to be stalked by Legion. The preacher Judith Jones asks, “How many people in our world are haunted by a traumatic past and tortured by memories? How many live unsheltered and inadequately clothed because of social and economic forces that they cannot overcome, no matter how hard they struggle? How many are imprisoned, regarded as barely human, excluded, cast out? How many are enslaved by addictions no longer knowing where the addiction ends, and their own selves begin? Where,” Jones continues, “do the governing authorities separate people from their families, denying them the opportunity to seek better lives? Where do occupying armies still brutalize entire communities and hold them captive to fear?”
3. Yes. There is no doubt that many things seek to hold us captive. The Legion is many; the Legion is strong. But when Legion sees Jesus, it recognizes him as the Son of the Most High God. Legion cowers in fear, not even wanting to be sent back whence it came. Evil is finally no match for Jesus, come to set the captive free through his dying and rising, and so Legion’s fear is unsurprising. What *is* surprising is the fear that comes over the townspeople in the wake of the exorcism. Their neighbor, long possessed, has been set free. He is no longer Legion; he is himself. Instead of rejoicing, however, the people are seized with great fear. Whereas the demons knew what Jesus had to do with them, the people wanted nothing to do with Jesus. Why?

4. Well, because freedom – real freedom, centered not in ourselves but in Jesus Christ – seems a scary thing. Freedom means actual possibility and real relationship. Freedom means setting aside the chains we use to keep others away from ourselves; freedom knocks down the walls we build to keep ourselves safe from those who are other, different, in our eyes less than – those who by demon or simple difference don't fit into our notion of what is safe or proper. We settle for the devil we know, who tempts us with what passes for life but misses out on the creative, relational joy that comes with freedom. As Red says in the prison movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, “These walls are kind of funny. First you hate ‘em, then you get used to ‘em. Enough time passes, gets so you depend on ‘em. They send you here for life, that’s exactly what they take. The part that counts, anyways.” We depend on walls and chains and social norms to protect our small version of life, but Jesus has come to call us into freedom – a freedom that no longer knows Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. A freedom that shows no partiality. A freedom in which all are one in Christ, children of God through faith.
5. In Christ, we are set free from death and sin and the fear they create. In Christ, we are set free for one another. This freedom does not give us permission to turn away from those at the margins; it draws us to them. In fact, in our newfound freedom, *we* may well end up on the margins. As Flannery O'Connor put in, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd.” Odd, because true freedom looks so different from the imitations we buy and sell, into which we misplace our faith. Odd though we may be, our lives are changed when the chains crumble and the walls fall down. We are set free, and free to do what Jesus asks of the man in today's gospel, to go and declare how much God has done for you.
6. Today we bless and commission our mission team that leaves in a few days for Slovakia. We will be partnering in the work of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ in a country that lost two generations to the demons of

communist rule. For so many years, the faithful suffered for the sake of Christ. Now, they have freedom, and these faithful disciples of Jesus have dedicated their lives to the work of the gospel. As Bohdan Hrobon, the director of the Center for Christian Education says, "We finally had freedom. What else would we do with it?" This is the constant question for you and for me, we who have been set free by Jesus and given to one another in the gospel: You have freedom. What will you do with it? Perhaps the thing for which we truly need courage is not so that we can live within captivity, but so that we can have the courage to leave captivity behind, and the courage to invite others to join us – even those, especially those, who have nowhere else to be. Freed in Christ, may you leave the chains behind, and may your life courageously, boldly, and freely proclaim all that Jesus has done for you.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.