

Michel Lucas Sermon
St. Benedict Episcopal Church, Los Osos
6 July 2025
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

2 Kings 5:1-14 Psalm 30 Luke 10:1-11, 16-20.

Roots, Demons, and Miracles.

In preparing for this sermon across the emancipation day of Juneteenth and independence day of the Fourth of July I was struck by two of our readings for today. In Kings, *arrogance* is the reaction of general Naaman to the initial offer of healing for his leprosy. In Luke seventy disciples are sent out to prepare the way and in doing so, find demons fear them.

Arrogance is the result of a limiting frame we place on the world generated from our own ego and expectations. We expect certain pathways and outcomes. We receive that framing from our larger culture and identities we form. Frames contain and exclude. Frames determine what is beautiful, what is possible, whether miracles and demons are stories or real. We can see an example of competing frames in the use of the word “beautiful” just over the last weeks. I will give you examples as large as a nation and as small as a bloom in our garden to reflect on.

As a successful general, Naaman was used to giving orders and having them executed. When he arrives with his horses and chariots laden with gifts of gold at Elisha’s home, Elisha does not appear but sends out his messenger to tell him to wash in the Jordan and God will heal him. Naaman is furious- first that Elisha himself did not appear with the command, and then that the balm was to bathe in the Jordan, and not one of the great and beautiful rivers of Damascus. I am guessing that is the equal of our thinking a beach at Big Sur versus the creek along Turi Road. His expectations not met, he leaves in a rage. His servants later ask him to reflect, and he changes his attitude, and does as Elisha’s messenger had told him to do. He was cured. It was a miracle, but one deferred due to his arrogance of framing his own expectations above the prophet’s words to him.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus appoints seventy to go forward to the places he intended to go, telling them “I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves”. Later, when the seventy return, they tell him “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us.” In the frame of our dominant culture miracles and demons are not spoken of- simply anachronistic verbiage from ancient texts.

But are they? As Christians, we may sense the presence of God in the form of miracles in our history, the commonplace, as well as in our future. Demons- I am less sure as to their being ideas or entities, but I sense them real.

Let me reflect on framing and miracles a larger national and historic scale. Ann and I had our first house some forty years ago in the historic waterfront neighborhood of Fell’s Point, just east of the inner harbor in Baltimore. This is where in the period of American independence from England the great merchant and first warships were built. Just a block on the waterfront from our renovated twelve-foot-narrow ship builder’s row home we could see Fort McHenry on a peninsula to the south. In a way it was a miracle in 1812 that following the burning of Washington DC that the might of the British navy did not destroy Fort McHenry and defeat a nascent America. The Star-Spangled Banner, set to a popular pub drinking tune, tells of those exploits of survival in the War of 1812.

In the 1830's, just a few blocks east from our house and just after it was built, Sophia Auld taught their twelve-year-old black slave Frederick Douglass to read. She taught him in secret until her husband discovered and ended the lessons. Douglass continued his self-education alone and at age twenty escaped his enslavement, and became one of the greatest abolitionist orators, advancing an emancipatory cause that much of the rest of the colonizing world had yielded to decades earlier.

During the 1860's, Union cannons lined the rim of Federal Hill overlooking Baltimore's inner harbor and also visible from our waterfront. They were there not to defend against an external enemy but police the very docks supplied Baltimore. While mountainous western Maryland was strongly Union sympathizers and route for the underground railroad of slaves to freedom, Baltimore and the peninsula on the eastern shore of Chesapeake Bay were firmly part of a plantation/slave economy. Frederick Douglass was the messenger for the miracle that led to the exorcism of that American demon of dehumanization.

We can see framing and miracles at a smaller scale. I worked on our church landscape this week, almost finishing the trimming of our meadow fire perimeter begun by JW's outstanding mowing. In the bulb garden at the end of our veranda I decided to take the tall weeds out by hand by the roots, so they would not return as easily. Dandelions and their spiked leaf and bumpy leafed cousins have a taproot one cannot see- frequently half the length of the rising flowered stems. Some are stubborn, but I was able to fill a fifty-gallon container with them.

I let lay some lower spreading plants- some with especially delicate leaves and colored buds of orange and pink hues. I was astonished at their ability to thrive in our difficult garden soil that sometimes has the hardness of what is called in the southwest states "caliche" or hardpan. I think they are a miracle. I saw snails and lizards, and in the quiet heard our collection of mockingbirds and bluejays sing. Horses frolicked then hid from the sun under the shade of the Monterrey pines in the pasture of our eastern neighbor. Hollister Peak came and went in the movement of the marine layer mists. I felt a gratefulness to be in the beauty of our church home. Amidst all the blessings of this church family, I offered a short prayer of gratitude.

Framing history here at St. Ben's, I am also reminded this is our church's twenty-fifth year since it moving from Camp Roberts and reconstruction. Several members such as Sarah and David Chesebro, Diana Hammerlund, Pat Stoneman, and Bob Pelfrey were there as the small group of faithful built the community from living rooms, to the chapel at the cemetery across the street, to the Los Osos community center, and then what was built here. Surely that transition is a miracle.

It is a miracle as a smaller congregation we survived covid. It is a miracle that in a time when we were told we may wait a year or more for qualified candidates we found Linzi+ within weeks of our church's call being out into the world. As with the Psalmist's word for today, we are "clothed in joy".

This framing is not based on arrogance or independence but dependence- we cannot do God's work alone. Richard Rohr noted just this week, "When we place all our identity in one country, one security system, religion, or ethnic group, we are unable to imagine another way of thinking. Only our citizenship in a much larger Realm of God can emancipate us..." Freedom is the joy of becoming who we are in light of Who God is.

On this fourth Sunday after Pentecost, celebrating when the community of faith was first gifted with the Holy Spirit, as we consider coming years this fall, can we dream of the miracle of a full-time priest? In the age of the spirit, what are our gifts that get taken into the community to spread the Gospel? Who can we reach out to welcome to join us? As Linzi+ has reminded us, our faith as Episcopians is one of participation with. It has a deep legacy of our trusting God, tangible immediacy of the presence of God, and a future intentionality empowered by the Holy Spirit.

This future is particularly daunting when considering the seventy from Luke. Certainly, in these contentious times, we seem sent out to the wolves. They may be political, economic or social wolves or those of secular suspicion of faith communities speaking in the public community, or wolves of sibling rivalries over the hermeneutics of the faith.

But I don't think that even those wolves are the deepest demons of our challenge. Because of framing we may uncritically accept, the world has a flatness, lack of depth, lack of vividness. We may see unclearly. Demons hide subtly behind beauty as well as within shadow. It is much harder to discern demons hidden like roots. Dare we think we may cast out demons?

Our post-Pentecost life of surrender is one of keen awareness and action. We offer this as a people of joy, gifted for the challenge by the power of the Holy Spirit. While we may discern direction, we have no end. We are constantly preparing the way.

As we look to that challenge, these words in a benediction were offered by Ignatius, Patriarch of Antioch in 1979:

Without the Holy Spirit:

God is far away,
Christ stays in the past,
The church is simply an organization,
Authority is a matter of domination,
Mission is a matter of propaganda,
The liturgy is no more than an evocation,
Christian living is a slave morality,
The Gospel is a dead letter,
And preaching is futile.

But with the Holy Spirit:

The cosmos is resurrected and groans with the birth-pangs of the kingdom,
The risen Christ is here,
The church shows forth the life of the Trinity,
Authority is a liberating service,
Mission is Pentecost,
The liturgy is both memorial and anticipation,
Human action is deified,
The Gospel is living and active...

Amen