

*Letting Go of Legion*  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
June 23, 2019  
Trinity Bixby  
Rev. Lucus Levy Keppel

[I Kings 19:8-13](#)  
[Luke 8:26-39](#)

Thirty years ago this month, a wave of protests swept across the People's Republic of China, ultimately culminating on June 4<sup>th</sup> 1989 with what we call the Tiananmen Square incident. Perhaps you remember watching video footage of these protests, and the repressive government crackdown that followed – and the most famous of all, the video of a person we only know as “tankman” facing down a line of tanks. These protests marked a swing back to censorship and repression from the Communist Party of China, and even thirty years later, their government forbids discussion of the events surrounding the protests. As famous as the Tankman footage is outside of China, it is banned from publication both in print and on the internet within the country. Even today, Chinese students in Western universities are surprised to learn about the events of the Tiananmen Square crackdown – and how different the uncensored internet portrays the events.

Yet, many in China, despite the government censorship, have continued to tell their firsthand accounts of the protests and the massacre that followed. One of the great sources of information these days are the Protestant house churches in China. To be clear, these churches are illegal – under current law, the only authorized church is the so-called Chinese Catholic church, which echoes the Party line. Yet, Protestant house churches continue to spring up across China, and pastors are increasingly vocal about their support for separation between state and church.

For instance, the Reverend Wang Yi, founding pastor of Early Rain Covenant Church, has led worship services every year remembering the victims of Tiananmen Square, and retelling the events that led up to it. He was 16 at the time of the

protests, and became a professor of law before being baptized, founding a church, and being ordained as a Pastor in the Reformed tradition. Speaking from the pulpit and as a private citizen, he has condemned the Communist Party of China for its brutal practices and attempted control of religious traditions. But Pastor Wang Yi wasn't able to lead a service of remembrance this year, because last December he, his wife, and many of his church members were arrested on charges of sedition. While his church members have all been released, he and his wife remain imprisoned, without access to communication to the people outside. His 11 year old son now lives with his grandparents, hoping that he will see his parents again, but not knowing exactly what has happened to them. I, too, pray that they will be reunited.

In many ways, Pastor Wang's experience in China reflects the situation for the early Christian church in the Roman Empire. While Paul's letters to the churches were written in the 50s (not the 1950s – the first 50s!), all of the Gospel accounts were likely written in the 70s or later, in the midst of Roman persecution of Christians and Jews after the War for Jewish Independence, culminating in the destruction of the Temple in the year 70.

This Jewish revolution was the first of three attempts to throw off the yoke of the Roman Empire in the region of modern day Israel, Jordan, and Syria. Rome had brutally oppressed the Jewish people, killing many and intentionally provoking them by confiscating Temple funds, bringing Pagan symbols into the Temple gates, and even setting up agitators in protests to try to turn public sentiment against the protestors. Before the Temple was destroyed, the Roman occupiers even sacrificed a pig inside, desecrating the grounds. One of the occupying legions even adopted the symbol of a boar while in the area, possibly intended as a provocative act. It's no wonder that the Jewish people rose up against such abuses of power.

This is the environment in which the Gospels were written. The fear of oppression – and the way that Jesus encouraged people to resist oppression not through force of arms, but through true peace and love. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is shown casting out a group of demons who claim themselves to be “Legion,” the

name for five- to six-thousand soldiers of the Roman army. Yet, this “Legion” of demons identifies Jesus as God’s son – that is, they recognize Jesus’ divinity immediately, and beg Jesus to not send them to “the abyss.” Jesus instead sends the legion into a herd of pigs, which jump off a bank into the lake and drown themselves.

Like many of the demon exorcism stories, this story has many layers to it. At the first read, it's a story of Jesus healing a man – restoring him to sanity and life within his community. In Luke’s Gospel, this is the first person that Jesus tells to go and tell others what has happened – it’s a preview for the disciples as to what they’ll be called to do. But I think we can also read it as a story about oppression and resurrection.

On one level, a legion associated with pigs in the area of Gerasa would have been immediately identified as the “peacekeeping” legion I mentioned earlier. When they came through Gerasa during the Jewish Revolt, they burned down many houses and killed a thousand of the inhabitants, both Jewish and Gentile. Is it any wonder, then, that a man filled with a “Legion” wants to be free? Luke points out that time and time again, the people of the city had tried to chain him down, and he always broke the chains to flee to the tombs by the lake. Perhaps in despair, he saw himself as already dead to the world, so the tombs were the right place to be. Perhaps he was trying to prevent the legion from harming anyone else in the city. Perhaps God led him to the right place at the right time, for Jesus to save him, to restore him to life. To finally help him let go of the legion.

And while the man was restored to the community, it seems the manner of his restoration left them pretty upset. The swineherds, now out of a job, go tell everyone of what happened, and the people ask Jesus to leave. They’re more concerned about losing their economic way of life than about learning what Jesus is teaching them – that you should have a great hope in letting go of the legion, letting go of the ways of violence, and living in God’s presence. For that is what happens to the man – he preaches of the power of God to heal, to restore to life, even the most possessed, the most fearful, the most unlikely. That God restores us to live fully in

the world, to be free of the oppressor and the fear of oppression that drives so much of the world.

We must pay attention – and follow suit. What legion is it that is trying to torment you? What forces are trying to keep you quiet, rather than speaking up for the way of Truth and Love? Remember the story of Elijah? He felt the oppressive forces of a monarchy bent on driving out worship for God, and was so overwhelmed that he fled into the desert, through himself down, and said he'd rather be dead than continue. Yet, even in his lowest point, rebelling against the path God set for him, God fed him, asked him to sleep – and then brought him to a mountain, showing him the voice of God in the still, small voice. When you feel overwhelmed, it's ok to take time away. It's ok to stop and eat a snack, take a nap, and then listen for God's voice. And when you have been restored, it's good to preach about how God has led you out of the fear and practice of violence – and into the peace and harmony of God's love.

In the early Christian community, that's just what happened. Emboldened to claim God's non-violent way, many Christians withstood persecution, refusing to give in to the literal legion trying to force them to change. They spoke up in love for their neighbors. They tried to live in the Way of Jesus, becoming a reflection of Christ in the world. And yes, they faced consequences for following Jesus – but they still stood up for their love of each other and God. That's just what Pastor Wang Yi has done in China – and I pray that others there and the world 'round will follow.

May you let go of legion, and live in God's love. Amen!