

***The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost***

*Proper 7*

*Revised Common Lectionary, Year C*

*June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2007*

***Episcopal Church of Our Saviour***

***Mill Valley, California***

***What are You Doing Here?***

***by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer, Rector***

One of my closest friends my first two years of college was Cheng. A biology major who later went on to become a minister, Cheng was and remains one of the most gentle, unassuming, and truly peaceful people I have ever known. He was always the calm in the midst of the rebellions of undergraduate life: the drinking, carousing, and usual antics of so many classmates seemed to hardly touch him. In my sophomore year, when we became roommates, Cheng proved to be a loyal and honest friend, a profound example of personal integrity that I continue to treasure as a bright spot in some of my own more wayward years.

And he was a devout Christian with an almost unshakable and remarkable faith, and a sense of the Spirit. He had a nose, it seemed, always for what was right, for what was most humble. His dignity flowed from a deep inner light and he seemed to have no interest in anything but what was true and just. He was a friend to everyone who would need friendship, a companion in adversity, and a calming presence in the midst of personal storm.

But as I got to know him better, I became acquainted with a haunting past that helped form the foundation for his remarkable character, and the character of his family and a people of a culture that had suffered from profound violence. Seared into Cheng's memory always are images from when he was only a toddler. His family is Hmong, a people in Southeast Asia who worked for the CIA during the Vietnam War era. When the United States pulled out of Vietnam in the mid-1970's and the communist regime overran South Vietnam, the royalist government in Laos – where Cheng's family lived – was also overthrown by a communist regime. The Hmong as a whole in Laos were immediate targets for incarceration, indoctrination, and worse. Thousands fled on foot to Thailand ahead of the advancing communist forces.

Cheng's family was among them. At younger than three years old, Cheng told me that he vividly remembers seeing elderly relatives sit down on the long road to Thailand – exhausted from the long march – never to be seen again. By the time he and his family reached Thailand, Cheng remembered how utterly emaciated he was. And he was among the fortunate. The United States permitted only a fraction of those who fled to Thailand into this country as refugees, among them Cheng's family, who settled in the Denver area and joined others in starting over almost completely from nothing.

It's hard to say precisely how this experience shaped Cheng's faith, personal integrity, or inner peace, but I can only imagine that at some very profound level it did. Knowing nothing but the road ahead, hands empty except for the children, hearts empty except for the hope and

determination to keep moving forward – this is the raw experience of so many refugees around the world. It runs like a common thread through their families for generations. It leaves marks on the children and grandchildren.

And as a matter of faith, of course, Cheng found solace and inspiration in Scripture stories like we hear today. Stories about refugees.

Elijah is the first refugee we hear about today. Returning from a miraculously divine and almost primeval, bloody victory against the prophets of Baal, Elijah is threatened by Jezebel, the wife of the King of Israel. Elijah immediately flees into the wilderness, and bereft of any further hope places himself utterly in the hands of God.

The second is a different sort of refugee in today's Gospel. This demoniac, a crazy man suffering what we might regard today as a particularly violent psychological disorder, has taken refuge in the tombs on the fringes of civilized society and has become an embodiment of all the evils of his time and place. That the demons he suffers are named "Legion" is no accident. This Greek word that has survived virtually unchanged into our present-day English epitomizes the Roman Imperial occupation. The ongoing terror of this political reality of Jesus' day torments the demoniac. It, in no uncertain terms, possesses him. In the [words of friend and colleague John Kirkley](#), this demoniac "internalized the dynamic of colonizer and colonized, characterized by brutality, exploitation, subservience, resentment, and guilt. In his inner life and relationship with his neighbors we see the evil of Roman imperialism writ large."<sup>1</sup>

Both Elijah and the demoniac are about to have an encounter with God. Elijah in the wilderness is tended by angels, and comes face-to-face with the Creator in one of the most moving mystical scenes of Hebrew Scripture. Following a great fire, earthquake, and whirlwind, he encounters the Divine presence following the "sound of sheer silence:" a God who simply asks the prophet, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Dramatic in different ways, Jesus casts out the "Legion" in the demoniac, restoring him to his full humanity and turning the local social order inside out. In an uncanny intersection of miracle, political statement, and religious observance, Jesus casts the demons into the herd of swine, who rush down the hillside and drown. The swineherds and city people are distraught at what this might mean – and whether it signals another confrontation between Rome and local Jewish rebels. And just who is this person, Jesus, who subdued and brought peace to a man no one else could even restrain with chains? This refugee for whom death was the only true refuge?

The story of Cheng and his family fleeing all they knew for an uncertain future in an uncertain land somehow resonates deeply with these stories of Elijah and the demoniac. They resonate, too, with the other great refugees of our scriptures: Moses fleeing Pharaoh's wrath and seeking refuge in Midian, where he will encounter God in the burning bush; Ruth and her mother-in-law, two Moabite women seeking refuge from famine in Bethlehem; The Holy Family fleeing to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod. It seems for the ancient authors of Scripture, our God has a high regard for refugees of many kinds.

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<sup>1</sup> "Modern Demoniacs", a sermon posted on June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2007, <http://revkirkley.blogspot.com/2007/06/modern-demoniacs.html>

Today we remember and say special prayers for refugees around the world: tens of millions of people, families, children, mothers, widows, orphans. They flee war and famine. Threats on their lives simply because of who they were when they were born, and for what they have stood for on principle. From Southeast Asia to Darfur to Iraq to Cubans in camps within our own borders, each of them has a distinct story to tell, like Elijah. Like the demoniac in the land of the Gerasenes. Like Cheng and his family. Stories that are each, in unique and incredible ways, burned through with the story of our God.

Some of those stories are closer to us than we know. Cut many of us to the bone, and you find ancestors who were refugees. Some from political and religious oppression. Some from economic ruin and collapse. Some from war. Some from broken lives too shattered to put back together. At the end of the day, we all share in our hearts the journey of the refugee, threatened by forces beyond our control, by machinations of the powerful, and we come each week here as spiritual refugees for even a moment, casting ourselves entirely into the hands of a God who knows us no matter where “here” is.

It is part of our vocation as Christians to see refugees of all kinds as God’s people, and whenever the opportunity arises, to speak up for their dignity, especially when it becomes expedient to sweep the desperate from public sight or to leave them wandering among the tombs.

For our God is the God of the refugees, the outcast, the stranger. God, we say as Christians, was a refugee in Jesus Christ, taking refuge in a human family, born to Egypt, and as an adult having no place to rest his head, and ultimately a victim, however holy, of political and religious persecution.

Each day now when I hear of refugees, I will remember my friend, Cheng. And I invite each of you to remember refugees you have known, even in your own household. Remember them the next time the voices of the powerful speak about their plights, of persecution, or about our national or international policy.

For to know a refugee is to know what it is to be human. And to know a refugee is, in no small way, to know Christ in the other.