

Sermon for Irving Park Lutheran Church, Feb 18<sup>th</sup>. First Sunday of Lent. Ole Schenk

Gospel: Mark 1:9-15

Title: "The Spirit's descent into our deep waters"

It was the last day of YAGM before departure out to our countries of service, the last day before taking a plane across the world. The last day, before a whole new world of unknowns, unknown faces, unknown friends, unknown challenges, would emerge and become clear for us. I remember that the YAGM director wanted us to know, that in our fear we all naturally were experiencing the presence of water in some form, would be a constant.

And so would God's word of promise go with us, shaping our experiences and struggles, and through the stories and struggles of all the people and communities we would walk alongside. Our minds and our hearts were roiling with the uncertainty, but like the cool touch of water marked on the cross to the hands and the forehead, we could rely on promise of God to reverberate out into our lives and into our mission, like waves as endless as the eternal life of God.

Hungary, where I was sent, is a landlocked country in the south-east of Europe, in the plain of the Danube river. It's not a part of Europe that typically features in our daily life, our awareness. But there are many inventions that we take for granted now that Hungarians gave us, including the stagecoach and the rubix cube—ok, so maybe not ones you use everyday, but then there's the carburetor, and the ballpoint pen, and the distribution transformer on electric power grids. What we have less of are loanwords from the Hungarian language or *magyarul*. Except for a few about food, "goulash," *gyulas*, and "paprika," *paprika*.

The Lutheran church, is a small part of Hungary's religious landscape. But, in a way that is totally unlike our church situation, Lutherans together with other nationally "registered" churches receive large amounts of state funding, for schools, care homes, and diaconal services like food pantries. And the Hungarian Lutheran church has been relatively receptive toward working with the Roma, Hungary's largest minority population. It is in supporting the Lutherans' openness to the Roma, that the ELCA especially has focused its role in mission.

When the Roma first arrived in Europe in the middle ages their dark skin was taken by settled European peoples as some sign: They were immediately marked as different and unwelcome, barbarians. In such a hostile atmosphere, a people must carve out a way to survive. And, in the image of the Roma as wandering musicians, traders, fortune-tellers, that we have our conception of them as "gypsies." This is a word that Roma people often no longer use as in most European languages it has become almost synonymous with stigma and crime. In the 1940s, fascists both Hungarian and German attempted to round up Roma people along with Hungary's Jews, to send to Auschwitz. This was the "final solution" for the "Gypsy problem" and the terrible end of the train of logic that casts people as "problems." The Roma survived the 1940s, as they had survived so many other hells.

In the town where I was sent, Roma people made up about half the community, for one group, the economic activity was breeding and trading horses. Unlike other parts of the country where Roma may live in dire poverty, many had large houses near the middle of the town and horse barns on the outside.

My main assignment, though was with the white Hungarian Lutheran church, in teaching religion classes in English at the church high school. There my faithful colleague, who could help translate for me when the message wasn't getting across, was Klari, a middle-aged woman who with her husband was raising three children, getting to work and her youngest to daycare, all on bicycle.

Klari was a woman of strong faith, and genuinely wished to serve God in this situation, with these high schoolers who were at best lukewarm to anything religious. She was with me in the desire to be creative to find ways to share a message about the love of God in Jesus Christ. And Klari was open to the mission that I had with the ELCA, to seek to make contacts that I could with Roma people, learn from them, and connect them with the Hungarian Lutheran church as best as I could. Though it was also clear that this mission stretched her. I could read her body language every time we would talk about the Roma.

With the help of my pastor, I found a Roma independent house-church. On Saturday nights I joined the circle of Roma worshippers, who built their temple to God with their voices and the songs they sang. The Roma were interested in me of course, the women who were largely the leaders, interested in the mission I had, and what kind of faith I had, if I had made a decision to give my heart to Jesus, and if I had received the gift of the Spirit. Some of the men, on the other hand, were really curious that I was Canadian, and if I could help them export horses overseas.

Klari came with me, on more than one occasion, and I was able to invite more of my teacher colleague from the Lutheran school to come with me to the Roma church. The more we talked about this, the more she opened up to me about what she was going through. She admitted that she knew with her mind that racism was wrong, that Roma people were the victims of discrimination and stereotype. And she told me about how once when she was a child with her grandmother, a group of young Roma came into the yard, and when her grandmother went out to contend with them, the young Klari watched them from the window knock her grandmother down. She knew it was wrong to let that incident rule over her heart toward what God could do. And coming with me to worship God with the Roma house church was a big step.

I eventually had a meeting with two of the Roma women from the congregation and with Klari, so that we could have an extended conversation with translation. I had wanted to learn more, but they had questions for me: "Do you think the members of your church are true believers?" Surprised with the force of this question, I was searching for an answer, I replied that "I believed that the Holy Spirit was active in my church, and was active through Word and Sacrament, even if its members and myself included often fell short of the Gospel." That answer was not enough, for Agi, the woman who picked up on the theme of the Holy Spirit. "So are you saying that the Holy Spirit is active in your *racist* church?" I was silent, and felt a ripple move through me, gather up everything, all my fear and my pride, and my motives, some of well-intentioned, and some culpable, and I felt the clarity of her

question drawing out of me some kind of answer. As she watched me struggling to form a reply, the anger in her face cooled, and then she brought the question home, “is the Holy Spirit racist?”

And I felt like I was simultaneously surrendering up a confession and coming into clarity on something that I knew but had not had the courage to grasp and say directly, “no, the Holy Spirit is Holy. The Holy Spirit is not racist.”

As the Hungarian youth that I taught English and religion to in the school became more comfortable with me as the months went by, they also came to challenge me on what I thought about the Roma. They were incredulous that I was going to a Roma church, and that I would seek to defend them. “*They* [Roma] don’t work like us, the families have so many babies so they can collect more welfare money, their children bully and act aggressive in school and so they can’t be educated with us, their young people push drugs and intimidate their clients, and they all don’t want to discipline themselves and hold a job, and so you see they *are not people* like us.” The sting of the situation was also that I felt to a certain extent constrained in speaking back by the fact that I was a guest, a temporary participant in their country. Did I have the authority to counter the worldview that they had grown up and grown into, when I was a privileged outsider? Yet I had to grow in that situation, and think of the faces of Agi and Kriszti, of Berci, and to hear them singing, and to see them praying for their community, songs and prayers that I had joined in, and then turn back to my students and say that they were wrong to say that the “Roma were not people like us.” “They are human beings, made in the image of God, they are our neighbours.” I did not resist with the conviction that I should have, but the situation, like the question from the Roma women, was the Spirit conforming me to new ways of living in the deep and dangerous waters. To wade in those waters. To walk in ways of repentance. Hear the Good News. Repent and believe. And speak up.

And the waters for this country are deep. Here today, we are worshipping together with our siblings in Christ, Larry and Dee, witnesses to the Spirit’s work in our hearts, the Spirit of Christ who calls us to resist temptation, to hear truth, to work for reconciliation between races in this city.

And the waters are deep in Florida. Where so many youth, and parents, from this shattered school, are calling out to the whole country for repentance. Calling us to see clearly the cost of our worship of guns.

At Jesus baptism, the Holy Spirit is descending like a dove, as Jesus chooses to go down, down into the swirling waters, the waters that could drown and destroy, and Jesus goes there fully immersed into the depths with us, and for us, to the end of our lives, in the endless life of God.