St. Philip Church Victoria 19 June 2022 – Rev. Peter Parker, Sermon

May I speak to you now in the name of God, creator, redeemer and sustainer. Amen.

“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is now no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

I have a question for you: why did you choose the clothes you chose to put on this morning?

Do you ever wonder about that when you go downtown to the mall and see what different people are wearing? The fellow in the jeans, plaid shirt, camo vest, ball cap and boots, with a chain attached to whatever is in his hip pocket projects an identity very different from the fellow who is in the khaki cargo shorts and sandals, with a short sleeve shirt and a light green sweater draped over his shoulders. I, in my clerical collar, long black pants with a crease, and oxfords, project a very specific image; likewise the police officer, or the construction worker in safety toe boots and the visi-vest. I won't even begin to tackle the image projection of various women's fashions - I could get into a lot of trouble without intending to!

The point is, the clothes we choose are often akin to a uniform: I belong to this group of people, I belong to that group of people. They inform others about who we are and how we might be expected to interact. Into this picture we hear Paul's words: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ.” We have a uniform: we're clothed with Christ. Uniforms can identify, they can hide, they can disguise, they can make the wearer feel empowered, part of a household. They can be reminders of who we are, what our role is.

Well, the man living in the graveyard, a gentile who was considered ritually unclean, living in a place of ritual uncleanness next to a pig farm - how much more uncleanness could be written into a Jewish story? - the man who had many demons in him had been driven to having no clothes at all, the extreme opposite of having a nice uniform. He has no identity with any group. He's homeless, living in the tombs, probably because no one would go into that place. Let's think about how that might be for a moment how a person might get that way.

There's a little word at the beginning of the story; in the Greek it's the word *polios*, and it's translated ‘of the city’. This man was a city person. So what's it like to be a city person? What's life in the city like? Well, it's busy, noisy, expensive, pressures on all side. It was the same back then - different clothing and structure, but city life can be full of conflict, especially if the demons of the city take hold. Well, this city man found himself in complete conflict. He became so stressed, so conflicted, he no longer knew who he wanted to be. No uniform would fit. Is not this true of so many city folk? So many pressures, so many involvements. We become possessed almost with a legion of these pressure devils.

Now, we could take this case of multiple personality or dissociative disorder, as psychologists now call it, as the result of severe childhood trauma. He may well have developed a legion of alternate personalities as ways of escaping the awful reality he was experiencing as a child. I have met a number of women, tragically, who have fallen victim to that dissociative disorder because of childhood sexual abuse.

But I think the man in this miracle story was much more ordinary than that. Described as a man of the city, he's lived in town, he's gone about his business, but with the pressures of a city full of deals and bills to pay and taxes to raise and bosses to satisfy, perhaps a wife and children to please, aging parents to care for – enticements, who knows what pressures. We're not told what caused him to break down, to lose control, to become the victim of all these pressures inside. Suffice to say, he's fragmented. He's not at one, not in his right mind, but in the grips of a host of wrong or false minds. Not only does his former city uniform no longer fit, he can't keep any uniform, any clothes, on him, no identity at all.

Then Jesus arrives: note the good Jewish rabbi and healer deliberately going headlong into a place of total uncleanness, to help someone who technically doesn't ‘deserve’ his attention, let alone presence. And when Jesus heals him, it is said that he is “found clothed and in his right mind.” The restoration of unity in the mind and spirit so that the soul can grow into health and closeness with the divine: that is healing. Once healed, he's able to choose an identity, to choose clothes. It doesn't matter what his particular clothing was, it was his, and he wore it without tearing it to shreds and throwing it away. And in the compassion and care of Jesus and the incredible power of Jesus to bring him into the full presence of our healing God, he had found peace and unity.

If we'd heard the long Old Testament story appointed for this morning, we would have heard of Elijah also escaping the city, not because he was possessed of demons, but because he knew that he was on Queen Jezebel's death list. If he hung around, he would probably get assassinated. Elijah too was brought to his senses by the incredible power of the presence of God - a presence not found in the temple, nor was it found in the magnificent works of nature, not even in the powerful phenomena of earthquakes and fires and windstorms. Elijah found the presence of God in that still small voice.

What Jesus could do for the man in the tombs was to quiet all the noise and distraction of those nasty demons to create an inner silence in which the man in the tombs, but also Elijah, could hear God telling him who he really was; telling him to trust and follow that one inner voice.

Everything that we do as church is meant to create that space when the pressures, the distractions, the fears, the anxieties, all those nasty presences in our over-stimulated minds can be silenced, and the simple power of the God and father of our lord Jesus Christ can fill us with that peace and calm that Elijah knew in the still small voice, that quiet murmur. Hearing that voice, we can know who we are and whose we are. All the other stuff - the pain, the fear, the disappointments, the shames, the guilt, the hurts and angers, the gut-wrenching desires for revenge, that legion of demons that waits to take over is sent away from us so that we can find peace and unity. We can be then found in our right minds.

Today, according to the newspaper ads, it's Fathers’ Day. Especially for all the fathers who live with the pressures of this modern city world, wouldn't it be great for them to be able to experience that calm and quiet, to be made whole and free from those demonizing pressures and demands of modern urban life. Wouldn't it be so great if the dads of our human polis, our city, which is really now a worldwide city, wouldn't it be great if the dads could have space and time to show their sons and their daughters that the powerful presence of God's love in us is the one and only thing we need?

So what shall our uniform be? “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” Happy Fathers’ Day.