

“Lift Every Voice”
June 21, 2026

Luke 8:26-39

It’s now been five years since this nation officially designated Juneteenth as a national holiday. For more than two hundred years, millions of African and Black Americans were enslaved in this country, causing incalculable suffering and an original, national sin that I don’t think we’ve fully come to terms with in the years since. Finally in 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation declared an official end to slavery across this land.

However, in places that were off the beaten track in this country back in 1863, like the state of Texas, news about slaves being set free was delayed. In fact, it took another two and a half years after the Emancipation Proclamation before all slaves across our land were officially granted their freedom on June 19, 1865. Needless to say, that day was a long time coming. And the slaves in Galveston, Texas who heard the news for the first time on that June day began to celebrate even before the Emancipation Proclamation was read in its entirety.

Try and picture with me in your mind what June 19th would have been like a hundred and sixty-one years ago. **(1)** When black men and women and children who had been considered another human being’s property for their whole lives were finally set free. Can you imagine the sheer joy of that day? The dancing, the cheering, the tears of disbelief and delight?

And the songs those newly free men and women and children must have sang! It would be thirty-five more years until the year 1900 before poet James Weldon Johnson penned the words to our final hymn in this morning’s worship service. But the words to that hymn would have been more than suitable for the occasion.

Over the years, the black church claimed our final hymn as a sacred text in their faith heritage and many other Christian churches have held the hymn in similar holy esteem. But I wonder if the words of “Lift Every Voice and Sing” took root in Galveston, Texas, during the freedom festivities held on that glorious day.

“Lift every voice and sing, till earth and heaven ring, ring with the harmonies of liberty, let our rejoicing rise high as the listening skies, let it resound loud as the rolling sea...”

Long before the first Juneteenth, the Gospel of Luke tells about a man who lived on the shore opposite Galilee. Possessed by multiple demons, the man was known by the name of “Legion.” Hardly a compliment given the fact that he was named in jest after the legions of Roman soldiers who would have wreaked violence across the land of Galilee on behalf of the Roman Empire.

The demon possessed man was bound in shackles and chains and he lived among the tombs...perhaps an ancient precursor to the modern storyline of the television show *The Walking Dead*. The man named Legion had no reason for hope at all until Jesus showed up on the beach one day. Soon thereafter, Jesus proceeded to cast the man's demons over the cliff in the midst of a herd of swine.

Suddenly freed from the devils who tormented him day and night, can you picture in your mind what that day might have looked like for the Gerasene Demoniac, the possessed man called "Legion", two thousand years ago? **(2)** It was surely a joyous day. Filled with dancing and cheering and tears of disbelief and delight.

And the songs Legion must have sung as he looked out over the Sea of Galilee. At the top of his lungs, not caring whether anyone would hear him or not. Back in the days of the Gerasene Demoniac, there was no such hymn as "Lift Every Voice and Sing." Nevertheless, the lyrics or words just like them would have been fitting for the miraculous occasion.

"Lift every voice and sing, till earth and heaven ring, ring with the harmonies of liberty, let our rejoicing rise high as the listening skies, let it resound loud as the rolling seas."

Legion was so busy laughing and whooping and hollering alongside the cliffs that day that he probably never noticed the reaction of those nearby who heard the news. Luke informs us that when Jesus notified the crowds of the Gerasene Demoniac's healing, they were immediately "seized with great fear."

Isn't that something? You would think the crowd would hear the good news and want to celebrate along with Legion. Or at least be mildly happy about his healing. Instead, they were seized with great fear. Was it because Legion's sudden restoration to health threatened the status quo which kept the crowd comfortable and complacent?

What if those crowds had embraced Legion instead? **(3)** What if they had seen the Gerasene Demoniac's healing as a sign of the love and mercy and grace of Jesus Christ available to all God's people? And what if they heard about the healing of the possessed man and came to Jesus in search of healing for the sins and shortcomings in their own lives? How different this morning's Gospel story would have been.

Rather, the crowds reacted with trepidation, caution, skepticism, suspicion. Which tends to be our human reaction so often when the status quo is threatened and something or someone jars us out of our comfort zone and our complacency. In fact, the fear mirrors the reaction of many white people in our nation at various points in history when we have lifted up and honored and celebrated black freedom and black prosperity.

The continuing rise in white Christian nationalism in our country in 2026 is a prime case in point. Couched in its own language of power and pride and superiority, I believe the predominant motivating theme that underpins white Christian nationalism is

fear. Fear of black voices and black power and black influence and black faith expression in our country. Not to mention fear of all people of color who happen to be non-white. Coupled with a prevailing fear of people who practice any faith that is not Christian.

Juneteenth represents everything white Christian nationalism does not. Independence, free will, self-determination, sheer joy. Meanwhile, how many white Christian nationalists mock and belittle Juneteenth? Or ignore it as illegitimate altogether?

What too many have forgotten in the United States is that Juneteenth is not just an occasion to honor and celebrate black freedom. It's also a reminder to all God's people, black, white and every race that God wants us to set aside the racism that plagues us. To overcome our fear filled bigotry and polarization. And to break down the walls that divide human beings from one another.

God's life-giving, liberating, love fueled work is for every one of us to claim and engage. And human beings build God's Beloved Community only when we do that work side by side. (4) Recognizing we all have things in our lives in need of healing. And trusting we all have things in our lives that should be lifted up and affirmed...

The first Juneteenth took place in Galveston, Texas one hundred and sixty-one years ago. Marking a truly momentous day in American history when all slaves were officially emancipated. And for the last five years, it's a holiday for all Americans. Based on the God given notion that emancipation for one leads to emancipation for all. Truth spoken and enacted for one invites truth spoken and enacted for all. And justice for our neighbor encourages justice for all.

So we gather here in this sanctuary this morning to sing a song of joy on behalf of Juneteenth. On behalf of Jesus Christ. On behalf of freedom.

"Lift every voice and sing, till earth and heaven ring, ring with the harmonies of liberty, let our rejoicing rise high as the listening skies, let it resound loud as the rolling sea."

May it be so. Amen.

- (1) The Rev. Derek M. Larson, TSSF, "Celebrating Freedom: A Homily for Juneteenth", as found on the blogsite, "Thoughts on Faith", (Second Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 7C, 2022) pg. 2.
- (2) Ibid, pg. 3.
- (3) Ibid, pg. 4.
- (4) Ibid, pg. 5.