



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Eugene, Oregon
“At Home” Worship
January 31, 2021

Gathering Around God’s Word

If you are worshipping with another family member or with children, you are invited to have different voices share and read the various parts of the service. You can also call/FaceTime someone to worship together. (If you have a prayer request you would like added to the At-Home Worship service, please email Brooke.office@wpceugene.org)

CALL TO WORSHIP

Give thanks to God with all your heart.

We come with awe at God’s marvelous works.

Give thanks to God with all your mind.

We come to learn God’s wisdom and righteousness.

Give thanks to God with all your strength.

We come to live in God’s mercy and grace.

OPENING HYMN

To God Be the Glory

#634

CALL TO CONFESSION

The one who pardons, heals and strengthens all who repent calls us to name our failings and our hopes. Let us confess our sin in the presence of God and one another.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Holy God, who commands all spirits, comforts those in distress, and casts out destructive forces, we confess that we are unable to do your will. We admire those with courage but excuse ourselves when we falter from the truth. We forget that you are always with us, and that with you all things are possible. Forgive us, lead us, make us new, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS

The God who made you and knows your every thought hears you now and forgives you all your sin. You have been redeemed through Jesus Christ, God’s son, our savior.

The Word

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Holy Spirit, your people call out for understanding. Bring to our yearning hearts and minds the truth of your word; in Jesus' name. Amen

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Old Testament Reading: Psalm 111

Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them. Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever. He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the LORD is gracious and merciful. He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant. He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations. The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy. They are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness. He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever

New Testament Reading: Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

ANTHEM

Jesus, Shepherd of My Heart

Katie and Tom Stocks

SERMON

"Unclean Spirits"

Rev. David Ukropina

As with most Bible passages, there are a lot of different things we could focus on with this text from Mark's gospel about Jesus teaching in the synagogue and driving out an unclean spirit. This is an important passage as it represents in Mark the beginning of Jesus' ministry, just following his baptism and calling of the disciples.

The great New Testament professor Jaroslav Pelikan describes this moment of the start of Jesus' ministry as one of the great turning points of history. If you think of the biggest moments in history, you might think of the start of world wars or the end of them, or other significant moments, but the start of Jesus' ministry would certainly be one of them, and it happens here.

And one of the things that happens early in Jesus' ministry and across his teachings, healings and miracles, is that the very presence of Jesus invokes two opposing reactions. One group, such as the scribes and Pharisees, set out to counter Jesus, but another group of people will open their hearts and minds to Jesus' words. They immediately begin by asking, "What is this? A new teaching – with authority!"

In our text today, we also get opposition from a man in the synagogue with an unclean spirit. As I mentioned earlier, there are many, many things we could focus on in this passage, such as the teaching of Jesus,

the nature of his authority, or the reaction of the synagogue, but at the heart of the passage is the driving out of an unclean spirit.

When Jesus begins his teaching in the synagogue, we read that a man with an unclean spirit cries out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God” It’s always interesting to me that in the gospels, its often the demons who know Jesus’ name.

However we understand it, Jesus performs a kind of exorcism, in saying “Be silent, and come out of him!” and then the unclean spirit convulses the man and cries out with a loud voice before coming out of him. Those in the synagogue were then amazed, saying “He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”

I always find it a bit creepy the way the man with the unclean spirit speaks in a plural voice, saying “What have you do with *us*, Jesus?” That plural voice evokes images from Hollywood movies about demons and exorcisms, and yet even with all the convulsing, we do not have a text with heads spinning around and spitting out blood or something like that.

Still, the passage does bring up the challenging theme of the demonic, and our understanding of it. I’ve talked about this before in sermons and classes. Presbyterians tend to differ in their understanding of spirits or demons, but as I’ve mentioned before, I tend to believe that they do exist in some form.

With C.S. Lewis in his introduction to his book *The Screwtape Letters*, my belief agrees with the plain sense of scripture and also the views of most Christians and most cultures across time. This belief is not central to my theology, and I don’t think about it a lot, but it’s something that comes up now and again.

We moderns often dismiss belief in demons as an ancient superstition that we know better about now. Either that, or we mainline Protestants sometimes dismiss it as something that more evangelical or Baptist believers tend to hold on to. Either that, or we tend to dismiss it as misunderstood mental illness.

As someone who has had both family members and close friends with severe mental illness, I always try to be careful about stigmatizing people who need our compassion, help and understanding, and I would never want to imply that the severely mentally ill are really possessed or in need of an exorcism.

I am sure this is true for all preachers, but there are times when I’m preparing a sermon that the theme of the sermon intersects with my own personal journey in some way. In this case, I can’t help but think of something that happened in the life of the church over the last few months that connects with this passage.

As some of you know, the church experienced some significant vandalism to the glass windows in the Fellowship Hall in November and again in early January. I will mention the basics of the story, but I will not be using the individual’s name, and I will mention that these are allegations, however well-founded and documented.

Back in November, during the night, an individual threw a large rock through one of the big panes of glass in the Fellowship Hall, the ones that are around ten feet high by six feet wide. The police were called and the person was apprehended but then released again. He returned in early January, and broke two more panes of glass, including the one we had replaced.

I should say that the individual is now being detained, but he was released multiple times during this rampage, and he damaged multiple other buildings in the area, including other churches and other buildings that were not churches, including the EWEB offices. These events occurred over several months and at several locations.

Chick, our facilities manager, and our Buildings and Grounds elders, have spent a lot of time dealing with this, and it will cost the church a significant amount of money, money that could have gone to important ministries of the church. Due to all of this, I found myself getting angry at the situation.

I was angry at the person doing this. Although I highly suspect he is suffering from mental illness, I was still mad that he would be so willfully and intentionally destructive in our community. I can deal with a lot of

chaos, brokenness and disfunction, but I tend to draw the line at willful, intentional destruction.

I also found myself getting mad at the court system. In every case, the police did their job effectively, but the courts kept releasing someone to commit violent felonies. I felt let down by the system, and also felt, as I have other times, like there has been an overall decline in respect for the church in our society and communities.

Getting back to the individual, one of the first thoughts I had upon learning about this destruction was, "What would ever possess someone to do that?" Those were the words that just came to my mind, and as I was preparing this sermon, that word "possess" came back to my recollection, and intersected with this sermon.

But I also think that's when I had to stop and slow down my thinking. I am always reluctant to slap the label of possessed or demonic on another person. I think in this case, it's more appropriate to speak of someone who is mentally ill and who needs psychiatric care. While the church did defend itself in speaking with the DA's office and seeking a restraining order, I did find myself thinking about this person, as well as myself.

I realized that God did not want me to descend into feelings of personal anger, no matter how justified they might have been or appeared to me. And while we are right to protect ourselves, I also found myself praying for this person, and that he get psychiatric help and perhaps even be healed by God during whatever journey he may be on.

As I prayed, I found myself settling down both from my own anger and in my thoughts towards this destructive person. And as I began settling down more, my thoughts started to shift more from the angry, violent destruction that happened, towards a more positive set of ideas and feelings.

And the new stream of thought that I had was that yes, the church was physically attacked, but the church has always been under attack. Just as the very start of Jesus' ministry began a long stream of two responses that either supported or opposed his ministry, so the church has always been both supported and attacked.

Especially in this day and age, the church can often seem irrelevant and off to the side somewhere in terms of culture and society. Most of the world goes by as if we aren't even here. But at the same time, the church serves as an outpost in the world, reminding those who might listen or pay attention, that Jesus is still here and at work in the world.

The fact that Jesus is here will attract destruction. That's not to say that his person was driven to intentionally destroy the church. But he served as a reminder that the church has always been under attack, in one way or another, all throughout the centuries and in all places on earth where the church appears.

Often times, the church is attacked from within, whether in the form of bitter church fights or antagonistic, destructive personalities within the church. Or the church can be physically attacked from outside, in the form of church bombings, church shootings, or so many other things we read about in the news.

One of the hymns I picked this week was The Church's One Foundation, and one of the reasons for that was that my sermon preparation reminded me of the line "Though with a scornful wonder, this world sees her oppressed, by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed." These words speak to the destruction the church sometimes faces.

But with all of this, the church is still here. It's still here in the world. It's here in the United States and it's here in Eugene, standing on the corner of Coburg and Harlow. It is still here, serving those in need, providing holy worship and communion, offering fellowship and mission opportunities to members of the congregation, Christian education for all ages, and many other ministries.

And if we ask why is the church still here, or how is it still able to be here after centuries of destructive acts against it, from both within and without the church, the simple answer is because of Jesus. Jesus is still here, with the church in a special way. The church is here because Jesus is still here.

And not only are Jesus and the church providing all these ministries, the church also continues to minister to those with all kinds of mental illness or personal demons, such as addictions, self-hatred, pridefulness, anxiety, and all kinds of personal “demons” that any person may be wrestling with.

In my fifteen years of ordained ministry, I have seen numerous people suffering from mental illness who have been ministered to in being told, over and over again, that each and every person is a child of God, created by God, and deeply loved by God. I have seen people, in connection with medical care, be deeply healed by this message of truth about who they are.

As a church, we will not ever be wholly at peace. There is just something in this world that wants to attack both Jesus and his church. But in the midst of that struggle, the church remains, to proclaim the gospel, and the good news that each and every person ever created is a beloved child of God. Amen.

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH - from A Brief Statement of Faith

We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God. Jesus proclaimed the reign of God; preaching good news to the poor and release to the captives, teaching by word and deed and blessing the children, healing the sick and binding up the brokenhearted, eating with outcasts, forgiving sinners, and calling all to repent and believe the gospel. Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition, Jesus was crucified, suffering the depths of human pain and giving his life for the sins of the world. God raised this Jesus from the dead, vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, delivering us from death to life eternal. Amen.

Responding to God's Word

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE AND THE LORD'S PRAYER

Let us pray for the needs of the world.

Loving God, we pray today for the healing of the earth and all its creatures...

We pray for congregations that are in turmoil, and for the healing of divisions between the followers of Christ...

We pray for the leaders of nations, for those that have great wealth and power, and those who have little...

We pray for children who need help, and for parents who care for them...

We pray for all who are in pain and in need of care, especially those we name before you...

We give you thanks for the people who have helped us in our faith; ancestors, teachers, ministers...

Loving God, we ask your blessing on all your people, that we may come at last to the truth, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray...

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

Sending of God's Word

CLOSING HYMN

The Church's One Foundation

#321

BENEDICTION

And now may the Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other.

-Genesis, 31:49