

Sunday, January 31st, 2021

4th Sunday After Epiphany

Call to Worship

Leader: Jesus comes calling, telling us that the kingdom of God has come near.

People: We seek to be part of that kingdom.

Leader: Jesus comes calling, telling us to repent, and believe in the good news.

People: We need to hear and believe this good news.

Leader: Jesus comes calling, asking us to leave things behind and live in a new way with him, in kingdom love.

People: So we will come, we will follow, we will become the disciples of Jesus.

Prayer of Adoration

Loving God, the wisdom behind all mystery, the glory hidden in all that makes us wonder, the strength in all that nourishes. Bless us, we pray with an awareness of your presence. Surprise us with your mysteries in the midst of our living. Transform us with the deep assurance of your love. In all we say and do, help us to follow Jesus. Amen.

Hymn 675 Precious Lord, take my hand

Prayer of Confession

O Calling God, sometimes when you call we're too busy to hear you. Sometimes you call and we're too tired to care. Sometimes you call and we go, but unwillingly, pulling back every step of the way. O merciful God, forgive our busyness, our tiredness, and help us to live life in your call through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

L: Friends, hear the Good News! Jesus has power to rid us of unclean spirits.

P: Jesus has power to cast out sin.

L: Friends, believe the Good News!

P: In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

Hymn 642 O Master, let me walk with thee

Mission Capsule – Knowledge Nourishes Babies and Families

When Cristina Flete gave birth to her first baby, she wasn't aware of how crucial exclusive breastfeeding and developmental activities could be to her child's long-term health. When her second child was born, Christina attended a workshop facilitated by Presbyterian World Service & Development's (PWS&D) local partner in Nicaragua. With other mothers, Christina learned the importance of breastmilk for a child's developing brain and how to create materials to stimulate her child's mind. Additionally, culinary classes empower parents with tools to help with their families' overall health. With PWS&D support, families are combating malnutrition and chronic illness, giving their babies the best chance for a future of good health.

Readings

Deuteronomy 18: 15-20	God will raise up a prophet after Moses
Psalms 111	The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom
1 Corinthians 8:1-13	Concerning food offered to idols
Mark 1: 21-28	The man with an unclean spirit is healed in Capernaum
Hymn 729	Silence! Frenzied, unclean spirit

Sermon: A Strange Worship Service.

The people who came to the synagogue in Capernaum on that Sabbath no doubt thought it was going to be just one more ordinary service. That meant there would be the usual prayers and scripture and a Scribe would offer a rather lengthy interpretation of the scripture for the people.

Like any congregational meeting today there would be conversations, although in our present time they would be limited due to Covid-19. So everything was taking place as usual that day. It was simply another day at the Synagogue!

Things went per usual until this stranger stood up and read the scriptures and following that he began to interpret them. As he spoke there was a sense developing among the people that something was quite different, for he spoke with an unusual authority and power. The people were not accustomed to hearing such an interpretation. It was developing as something other than a normal worship service.

This person made the scriptures come alive for them and what he said changed the way they saw themselves. The people were anxious to hear more, even though they had no idea who this person was. Someone in the congregation whispered to the person sitting next to him, **"Who is this guy?"**

Then the man went to sit down in the congregation, but everyone was disturbed by a man at the back of the congregation who moved toward the speaker, and began to shout in a manner that took the congregation by total surprise.

“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? “

“I know who you are, you are the Holy one of God.”

This seems more like a challenge than a question. The congregation was silent. Then the stranger stood up, confronted the man with the unclean spirit and commanded the spirit to leave the man.

The congregation, watching all this, began to say, **“What is this? a new teaching – with authority. He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him.”**

So what we have here is a man inside a synagogue with an unclean spirit, and another man, Jesus, who has power over the spirit, and a congregation that got a lot more than they bargained for in that worship service. Now I doubt that we are expecting anything like that here today. Indeed some would maintain that we have made worship so tame that a person could sleep through it all. Somewhere along the line we made a turn, deciding to make worship respectable.

We might note the setting of this story. Jesus has moved from the wilderness margin to the heart of the provincial Jewish social order – the holy time and space of a synagogue on the Sabbath day. This exorcism is framed in Mark’s telling of the crowd’s reaction:

“They were astonished at his teaching for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes.”

And then,

They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching with authority.”

In between those two statements by the people is the unclean spirit, who seems to challenge the presence of Jesus. We are not told what an unclean spirit is. Maybe the man simply had a bad temper or had such a great love for himself that he couldn’t stand another person doing the talking. In the first century they didn’t have a specific diagnosis for this sort of thing. All they could do was point and say, **“Something got into him.”**

A significant question is raised in this man’s statement, **“what have you to do with us?”**

Who is us? Then further, **“Have you come to destroy us?”** Again the us is not made clear. In order to get at this we need to have a sense of what ‘unclean’ means. In Mark’s gospel the word ‘unclean,’ can also mean, **‘vicious.’** That is why this spirit is often seen as a **“evil spirit.”**

In Mark, the usual suspects for opposing Jesus are the religious and political leaders. In this story it seems that the “us” is the scribes whose space Jesus is invading. This is scribal turf and it is the sabbath. What takes place here according to Mark is an indication that Jesus is the authority rather than the scribes.

There have always been people both inside and outside the church, who like this man in the synagogue, are in desperate need of freedom and transformation. We may not be confronted by evil spirits as such, but we are confronted by things in our lives that we cannot control. Those things have power over us and rob us of fullness of life.

Things that cut off our desire to have meaningful relationships with God and with other people.

We are held motionless by fears and self – doubt and self- hatred.

We are consumed by our anger and grudge- holding.

We are grasped by our racism and selfishness.

There are wounds old and new that don’t seem to heal.

In one of our hymns today, Tom Troeger, the author says,

“Lord, the demons still are thriving in the grey cells of the mind:

Tyrant voices, shrill and driving, twisted thoughts that grip and bind, doubts that stir the heart to panic, fears distorting reason’s sight, guilt that makes our loving frantic, dreams that cloud the soul with fright.”

It is easy to forget that a crucial truth in the New Testament is that Jesus comes to free us from whatever binds us. Today’s gospel invites us to see that Jesus comes into our midst for more than some personal enlightenment or illumination.

For centuries the people of God have sought to find God’s healing in worship, prayer and praise, bread and cup, sharing our concerns with one another, confessing our sins and listening to the stories of faithful people in scripture.

In all of that, there is the invitation to meet God, and the liberating Christ may speak a word of freedom to what binds us, and the Spirit comes to transform us. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Holy God, God of true prophets, God of cleansing Spirit, of all the prophets you sent speaking your words, none had the authority of your Son, Jesus Christ. Of all the healers of body, mind, and spirit, none have touched the lives of the sick, the troubled, and the sinful, with as gentle a power as Jesus of Nazareth. Of all the scholars and teachers we have known, none have

influenced for good as many by their lives and teaching as the Spirit of your Holy Child, Jesus. Thanks be to you, O God Almighty.

Draw close to us when we are feeling frustration or fear in the days ahead. Hear us now as we pray for the earth, this fragile home to all living things. In the loss of species, forests, and stability in climate we pray for your direction so we may be more faithful stewards and live more respectfully in creation.

Hear our prayers for the economy and for those whose decisions shape it. Remember employers and business owners, workers and those seeking work, and all who struggle for economic justice, fairness and the common good. Teach us, we pray, how to care for our neighbors. Hear our prayers for family and friends.

O God, bless those who have gone through the storms of life. Christ, man of sorrows, risen to new life, bring the light of resurrection and hope to those in the dark night of sorrow; those into whose circle of family or friends death has come.

Healing Christ, bring relief and recovery to those who are sick, especially give patience to those who are chronically ill, and a spirit of resignation to those for whom there will be only newness of life after death. O God in this time of pandemic, reunite families and friends who have quarreled and become estranged. May loving forgiveness draw them together again. Even when life is joyful and full of sunshine, help us to keep uppermost the eternal things that are not changed when night falls or the tides change and sweep away what has been dear to us. Bless your church. Give it wisdom to discern what really matters and not to be bogged down in trivia. Bless our country and give leaders a desire to serve the many rather than the few, and above all to serve your high purposes. Bless those we love, especially those from whom we are separated by space or by death that at the last we may be together again where there will be no more parting. The God of all grace, who has called us to eternal glory in Christ, will restore, support, strengthen and establish us. Hear our prayers as we offer them in the name of Christ, who teaches us to pray, saying...the Lord's Prayer...

Hymn 768 Sometimes, a healing word is comfort

Commissioning/Benediction

We are created in the image of God. We go out in the love of God. We are called by Christ. We go out following Jesus. We are empowered by the Holy Spirit, We go out with hearts afire. Amen.