

Unclean Spirits in the House of the Lord
Mark 1:21-28; Psalm 111

Psalm 111:1-10

¹Praise the Lord!

I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

²Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them.

³Full of honor and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures forever.

⁴He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;
the Lord is gracious and merciful.

⁵He provides food for those who fear him;
he is ever mindful of his covenant.

⁶He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the heritage of the nations.

⁷The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.

⁸They are established forever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.

⁹He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant forever.

Holy and awesome is his name.

¹⁰The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practice it have a good understanding.
His praise endures forever.

Mark 1:21-28

²¹They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the
synagogue and taught.

²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having
authority, and not as the scribes.

²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit,
²⁴and 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.” ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of
 him!”

²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice,
 came out of him.

²⁷They 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.”

²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of
 Galilee.

The Sermon

Longing for light, longing for truth;
 longing for peace, and hope;
 for food, water, shelter and warmth.
 Christ, be our light; shine through the darkness;
 shine in your church, gathered today.ⁱ

They come to the sanctuary holding in their hands the bare threads of
 their daily lives.

They know how the psalm goes:

“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...

The Lord is gracious, and merciful,
 always mindful of the covenant;
 faithful and just; trustworthy,
 Holy and awesome.”

These days especially, there is an aching resonance in the first verse from Psalm 111:

“I will give thanks with my whole heart
 in the company of the upright—
 in the congregation.”

In Capernaum, on the sabbath, Jesus entered the local synagogue and did what rabbis do: he sat down and taught.

They were astounded at his teaching.

All of a sudden, from someone in the synagogue came the cries of an unclean spirit, and a seething mouthful of implicit threat: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are...”

And Jesus rebuked him, and the unclean spirit, convulsing the man and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

Everybody was amazed, and they couldn’t stop asking each another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority!

That is so Presbyterian. An unclean spirit just writhed its way out of some poor guy on the sanctuary floor *right in the worship service*, left him with a banshee scream from Hades, and the congregation stood there for a second and then went, “Hey, how about that sermon today, huh? What’d you think of the preaching? I thought he made some interesting points.”

Just put the PC(USA) seal on the synagogue door; that is so *us*.

“I heard you guys had an exorcism this morning.”

“Yeah... Interesting sermon, though.”

I will give thanks in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

“Christ, be our light; shine through the darkness;
shine in your church, gathered today.”ⁱⁱ

We long for the day we can come before God together,
to lift up who we are,
and sing our awe at who God is;
to ask for help,
and to give thanks to God with our whole heart.

We long for that day to come. And it will. But today is also that day.

Whether you are in the public sanctuary or the sanctuary of the temple that is you—a temple into which God has placed the Holy Spirit—none of us comes to God in absolute purity or with all the answers. (That’s kind of the point.)

But whoever we are when we walk into God’s house, whatever we bring into that room, that sanctuary, God heals and redeems.

She was a reasonable and kind human being, meaningfully employed with a master’s degree, devoted to her family including her three teenage children.ⁱⁱⁱ It happened gradually, along with her disillusion and disgust with the way things were working for her family and the realization that people in leadership who had been claiming to be on her side for years and years and years were in fact doing practically nothing for her, while wealthy donors were being wined and dined.

As outlined in a recent story in the New York Times, the conspiracy theories, “were comforting, a way to get her bearings in a chaotic world that felt increasingly unequal and rigged against middle-class people like her.

“These stories offered agency: Evil cabals could be defeated. A diffuse sense that things were out of her control could not.”^{iv}

“The theories were fiction, but they hooked into an emotional vulnerability that sprang from something real...

“‘We felt we were coming from a place of moral superiority,’ she said later. ‘We were part of a special club.’”

Day and night, she began spending more and more of her life glued to the laptop or hunched over her cell phone, at the expense of family and friendships and career satisfaction.

“Her family was eating takeout all the time since she had stopped cooking and her stress levels had shot up, causing her blood pressure medication to stop working. Her doctor...doubled her dose.”^v

Eventually, she started to get “the first nagging feeling that something did not add up.”

Like all conspiracy theories from the beginning of time, the predicted events didn’t materialize, and observable reality, over and over, kept proving not to resemble in any way the scenarios that were being described.

“Five months and many more inconsistencies later, she finally called it quits. ‘At some point I realized, ‘Oh, there’s a reason this doesn’t fit,’” she said.

“Those who [leave the conspiracy world behind] are often filled with shame. Sometimes their addiction [has been] so severe that they have become estranged from family and friends.”

I was interested to hear a secular source at a major university being interviewed not too long ago, on a secular radio program, about the question of how to try to reach out to an estranged loved one who is deep into the conspiracy theories and has shut down their relationships with you and all other loved ones and aggressively rejects any word that’s contrary to the conspiracy theory narrative.

The professor, Dr. Dannagal Young, said research has shown that the one thing, the only thing, that can move the needle isn’t argument, or reason, or trying to meet somebody halfway.

The only way was two words that she described as the greatest chance and the only chance for movement: “unconditional love.”^{vi}

She suggested bringing up and reminiscing about shared memories that connect back to the original identity as sister, brother, father, mother, and just try to focus on those memories for a while.

To people who are dealing with having a close relative with whom they can’t even have a conversation anymore, she said first, “Understand whether or not it is worth it to you to take this road, because it will not be easy. And if you’re willing to put in the time and effort, I guarantee there will be movement. It will take time. But there will be movement.”^{vii}

When she said the words, “unconditional love,” I thought, “I know those words.” We know how to do that. That’s what we do.

Whoever we are when we walk into God’s house, whatever we bring into that room, that sanctuary, God can heal and redeem.

Each one of us is a sanctuary: a place where God abides, and from which God brings healing to the world; a place where people can come to find sacred rest, the holiness of consciousness and conscientiousness: the holiness of belonging, and mercy, and hope, and truth, the holiness of forgiveness and love.

And, we all have our unclean spirits. They stake a claim to holding ultimate power over us, but they are no match for the word and the touch of holiness.

And each of us is a congregant, observing and participating in the communal truth of being a bunch of holy people, each with our own share of pain and loss and weakness and need and failure.

Even or especially in a time when we are wearied by our circumstances, the stay-at-home orders and the beauty and madness of the world, we keep coming to our sanctuary, even if that just means coming home to ourselves, the selves that God created us to be.

Today's Prayer of Confession from Feasting on the Word says,

Holy and all-powerful God,
 who commands all spirits,
 comforts those in distress,
 and casts out destructive forces...
 show us your way...^{viii}

Charles Foucauld prayed more than a century ago,

O beloved Bridegroom, what have you not done for me?
 What do you want from me?
 What do you expect from me,
 that you have so overwhelmed me?

O God, give yourself thanks through me,

create remembrance, gratitude, fidelity, and love in me;
 I am overcome, I fail;
 create my thoughts, words, and deeds,
 so that they may all give you thanks and glorify you in me.
 Amen. Amen. Amen.^{ix}

Longing for light, longing for truth;
 longing for peace, and hope,
 Christ, be our light; shine through the darkness;
 shine in your church, gathered today.^x Amen.

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ⁱ This paragraph is composed of phrases compiled from Bernadette Farrell, “Longing for Light, We Wait in Darkness” (also known as “Christ, Be Our Light”). © 1993 Bernadette Farrell. Published by OCB.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Sabrina Tavernise, “‘Trump Just Used Us and Our Fear’: One Woman’s Journey Out of QAnon” (New York Times, Jan. 29, 2021, 5:00 A.M.)

^{iv} Tavernise, “One Woman’s Journey,” 2021

^v [One Woman’s Journey Out of QAnon - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/29/us/politics/qanon-woman-journey.html)

^{vi} Dr. Dannagal Young of the University of Delaware, interviewed on “All Things Considered” (NPR News, January 15, 2021)

^{vii} Young, All Things Considered, Jan. 15, 2021

^{viii} Feasting on the Word Worship Companion: Liturgies for Year B, Volume 1 © 2014 Westminster John Knox Press

^{ix} Foucauld (1897), Essential Writings (Ellsberg, ed. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 37

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