

**Sunday, January 31, 2021**

**Fourth Sunday after Epiphany / Lectionary 4, Year B**

## **Introduction**

In Deuteronomy God promises to raise up a prophet like Moses, who will speak for God; in Psalm 111 God shows the people the power of God's works. For the church these are ways of pointing to the unique authority people sensed in Jesus' actions and words. We encounter that authority in God's word, around which we gather, the word that prevails over any lesser spirit that would claim power over us, freeing us to follow Jesus.

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## **Prayer of the Day**

**P** Compassionate God, you gather the whole universe into your radiant presence and continually reveal your Son as our Saviour. Bring wholeness to all that is broken and speak truth to us in our confusion, that all creation will see and know your Son, Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord.

**C** **Amen.**

## **Deuteronomy 18:15-20**

*Today's reading is part of a longer discourse in Deuteronomy, an updating of the law for the Israelite community as the people wait to enter the promised land. Here Moses assures the people that God will continue to guide them through prophets who will proclaim the divine word.*

[Moses said:] <sup>15</sup>The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. <sup>16</sup>This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: "If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die." <sup>17</sup>Then the LORD replied to me: "They are right in what they have said. <sup>18</sup>I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. <sup>19</sup>Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. <sup>20</sup>But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die."

## **Psalm 111**

<sup>1</sup>Hallelujah! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,  
in the assembly of the upright, in the congregation.

<sup>2</sup>Great are your works, O LORD,  
pondered by all who delight in them.

<sup>3</sup>Majesty and splendour mark your deeds,  
and your righteousness endures forever.

<sup>4</sup>You cause your wonders to be remembered;  
you are gracious and full of compassion.

**R/ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.**

<sup>5</sup>You give food to those who fear you,  
remembering forever your covenant.

<sup>6</sup>You have shown your people the power of your works  
in giving them the lands of the nations.

<sup>7</sup>The works of your hands are faithfulness and justice;  
all of your precepts are sure.

<sup>8</sup>They stand fast forever and ever,  
because they are done in truth and equity.

**R/ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.**

<sup>9</sup>You sent redemption to your people and commanded your covenant forever;  
holy and awesome is your name.

<sup>10</sup>The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;  
all who practice this have a good understanding. God's praise endures forever.

**R/ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.**

## Mark 1:21-28

*Forces that would bring death and disease have taken hold of a man, yet they recognize Jesus and know what his power means for them. Jesus commands these forces to leave and people are amazed at his authority.*

<sup>21</sup>[Jesus and his disciples] went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.<sup>22</sup>They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. <sup>23</sup>Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, <sup>24</sup>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." <sup>25</sup>But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" <sup>26</sup>And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. <sup>27</sup>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." <sup>28</sup>At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

## Sermon

### Jesus, the Exorcist

*Near the very start of his story about Jesus,  
Mark tells us that Jesus' Spirit could drive out unclean spirits*

There's an awful lot packed into the opening chapter of the Gospel of Mark.

"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ..." starts with John the baptiser,  
preaching and washing  
at the Jordan River.

Leading us to Jesus' own baptism,  
and his Temptation in the wilderness.

Then the start of his work in Galilee:  
the call of the first disciples,  
and the exorcism of a man with an unclean spirit.

Which is followed by the healing of Simon Peter's mother-in-law,  
a preaching tour,  
and the cleansing of a man with leprosy.

It is the author's way of telling us that Jesus is a teacher, a healer,  
and an exorcist.

Let's take a closer look.

Mark calls the man who interrupts Jesus,  
while he was teaching in the local synagogue,  
someone possessed by an unclean Spirit.

The description a clue regarding what Jesus was up against,  
because the story works on two levels.

There are the things taking place in the flesh and blood world.

And the things taking place on a spiritual plane.

In the world of senses the man was not well.  
He was a nuisance,  
and the rest of the people in his village didn't know what to do with him.

And in the immaterial, "higher" world his condition was as attributed to an unclean spirit.

In fact, it was common in those days to conclude that earthly, human maladies,  
were caused by spiritual forces.

That physical, emotional and spiritual illnesses were a form of divine punishment;  
sin being at the root of it all.

It was simply understood that there were clean ways to live,  
and dirty ones;  
the Law of Moses distinguishing between the two.

So the man with an unclean spirit,  
who interrupts Jesus' lesson,  
is to be regarded as a sinner,  
who had ignored or defied the commandments.

And God punished him,  
by making him and those around him miserable.

And then on the spiritual plane  
we overhear a conversation.

The unclean spirit in the man recognises Jesus,  
even before the disciples or any others in the story.

And it is afraid of Jesus and his spiritual power.

In speaking Jesus' name and referring to his spiritual identity it hopes to gain the upper hand.

But Jesus is stronger.

And banishes the unclean spirit,  
freeing the man on both the spiritual and worldly level.

It turns out that while Jesus looks like an ordinary person,  
without any of the credentials or trappings of a higher station,  
he is in fact a powerful spiritual force to be reckoned with.

And Mark tells this story, early on,  
to give his readers fair warning.

This Jesus has spiritual or divine authority.

And this is true even if we take a 21<sup>st</sup> century view of the man's condition,  
replacing possession with mental illness,  
and exorcism with care or therapy.

Unlike so many others in the village  
Jesus listened to what the man had to say,  
his fears disguised as anger.

Jesus cared for the man,  
even as he rebuked the unclean spirit or illness.

And in the process he begins to ask witnesses to reconsider their beliefs about God.

Maybe God is not the stern judge and punisher we imagine.

Does God love sinners?

What has this got to do with the way I interact with my irksome neighbour?

No wonder Mark tells us that the people in the synagogue were amazed.  
Jesus had given them a lot to think about, in the worlds of flesh *and* spirits.

Amen

## Prayers of Intercession

P Guided by Christ made known to the nations, let us offer our prayers for the church, the world, and all people in need.

*A brief silence.*

A For all God's works in creation: plants and animals, water and soil, forests and farms; and for those tasked with protecting our natural resources and all that exists, let us pray.

**C Have mercy, O God.**

A For Good Shepherd Lutheran Church and all who share the gospel and proclaim freedom in Christ throughout the world: prophets, teachers, pastors, deacons, and lay leaders; for the church and its ministries, let us pray.

**C Have mercy, O God.**

A For government and leaders: cities and nations, rescue professionals and legal aid attorneys, elected officials and grassroots organisers; for all responsible for the well-being of civil society, let us pray.

**C Have mercy, O God.**

A For those who suffer in mind, body, or spirit: those who are sick and hospitalised, those living with HIV/AIDS, those struggling with mental illness, those who are hungry or homeless, those affected by COVID-19, and all in any need (*especially*); for caregivers, hospice workers, and home health aides, let us pray.

**C Have mercy, O God.**

A For the concerns of this congregation: those who travel, those absent from worship, those celebrating birthdays or anniversaries; for the people of God in this place and for other needs in our community (*especially*), let us pray.

**C Have mercy, O God.**

A For the covenant God made with us in the waters of baptism, in thanksgiving for the baptised who have died in the Lord, let us pray.

**C Have mercy, O God.**

P Merciful God, hear the prayers of your people, spoken or silent, for the sake of the one who dwells among us, your Son, Jesus Christ our Saviour.

**C Amen.**

## Offering Prayer

A O God,  
receive these gifts as you receive us:  
like a mother receives her child, with arms open wide.  
Nourish us anew in your tender care,  
and empower us in faithful service  
to tend to others with this same love,  
through Jesus Christ, our saving grace.

**C Amen.**

## Invitation to Communion

P Beloved: here is bread; here is wine. Here is Jesus.  
Come and be fed.

## Prayer after Communion

A Christ Jesus,  
at this table we have feasted on your very life  
and are strengthened for our journey.  
Send us forth from this banquet  
nourished in body and in spirit  
to proclaim your good news  
and serve others in your name.

C **Amen.**

## Blessing

P God the creator strengthen you;  
Jesus the beloved fill you;  
and the Holy Spirit the comforter ✝ keep you in peace.

C **Amen.**

## Dismissal

A Go in peace. Be the light of Christ.

C **Thanks be to God.**

## Upcoming Commemorations

### **Presentation of Our Lord**

**Tuesday, February 2, 2021**

Forty days after the birth of Jesus we mark the day Mary and Joseph presented him in the temple in accordance with Jewish law. There they were greeted by Simeon, an aged priest who offered the song "Lord, now you let your servant depart in peace," as well as by the prophet Anna, who spoke of the redemption of Israel.

### **Ansgar, Bishop of Hamburg, missionary to Denmark and Sweden, died 865**

**Wednesday, February 3, 2021**

A monk who helped bring Christianity to Scandinavia, Ansgar returned to Germany where he was named bishop of Hamburg. He is remembered for his love for poor people.

### **The Martyrs of Japan, died 1597**

**Friday, February 5, 2021**

Christianity was brought to Japan in the sixteenth century by Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries. The religion was suppressed, however, and in 1597 twenty-six missionaries and converts were crucified. Nevertheless, Christianity survived and later prospered.