

**Green Blades Preaching Roundtable**

**Eco Faith Commentaries for Epiphany 2024**

**By retired pastor Mark Ditmanson**

**Grand Marais, Minnesota**

**Introduction**

As you read this Epiphany is here, as I begin to write Advent is only just starting. And my thoughts are quite taken by the words for worship right now. At the very beginning of Advent we will hear Isaiah’s prophetic wish, “Would you just rend the heavens and come.” We will also hear Jesus’ response to that apocalyptic and mysterious longing with ‘wait for it.’ In our annually repeating liturgical discipline we seek to enter into the divine drama like so many generations before us. Even as we pray “stir up our hearts Lord,” Advent’s themes stir our spirits as we contemplate God’s announcement that the “kingdom is near.” Then finally the familiar festival of the Incarnation will be upon us. Centuries of longing answered in something so natural as a birth. We of course will adorn the celebration of that birth with crowded, and sometimes boisterous, sanctuaries decorated to our utmost where we will raise our voices and maybe “raise the roof” singing about angelic choirs “in excelsis deo Gloria!” And yet amid all the festivities my overwhelming image of Christmas is quietude. In my imagination in the aftermath of the birth I see the young woman take the crying infant in her arms, kiss its head, she rocks and hums and comforts it, just as the pattern had been happening and is still happening, quiet, intense, intimate mother and child. And in that quiet Christmas Eve moment as “I wonder as I wander” out to my car after the last late night service my heart turns to that classic Lutheran question: “what does this mean?” What does this mean to me, and to everyone, that the longing for the divine presence resulted in cuddling a little baby? There is so much to think about, and to allow those thoughts to shape our responses. What does it mean that our God so cares for, in fact esteems, the very substances of the created order that God would enter there. Partly, it is an honoring of the creation, an acknowledgement of the place of God’s heart. It is an acknowledgement that our faith is not based on some gnosis, some vague spirituality, some mystic inner striving within, but an encounter in the moments of life lived, an encounter with the prevailing presence of the Creator who loves the creation. A little baby says this and more to me, for an infant is such a tremendous statement of the depth of love as we have all experienced it in our lives or that of our extended families. And therefore we are to love God’s creations. We are to embody this intense intimate tending and keeping modeled for us in this moment. God placing God’s self in the cradling arms of humanity. And now in our arms we must cradle and care for the fragile, the young, the vulnerable, and most of all the loved by God.

And then finally we arrive at Epiphany. If advent is the season of longing and waiting for the presence of God to come into our hearts and homes and this troubled world; and if Christmas in the event of the incarnation of God in the swaddled and embraced Christ child is the season of the answer to that longing; then Epiphany strikes me as a particularly Lutheran season for asking, “What does this mean?” Indeed the event of Incarnation needs more that the two Sundays after Christmas. And Epiphany becomes for me the season of seeking answers. Many years ago I received the carved images of three magi from my parents’ home. I put them on my mantle for the first Christmas season in our new home. Twenty two years later they are still there. They never get put away. They stand there year around seeking answers and bearing gifts, and I have come to realize that that they represent something deep in my heart; that I have been seeking epiphanies to better understand this God who chose birth and incarnation to teach us love, justice, grace, freedom, the way of God. Epiphany is upon us and for me the arrival of these three seekers longing to know more fully what this means, that in the ‘fullness of time God sent his son,’ to be born, swaddled and loved as every child deserves. Incarnation leads me into a journey of seeking, or perhaps more accurately, being open to epiphanies of further revelation.

**January 7, 2024 Baptism of our Lord Genesis 1:1-5 Acts 19: 1-7 Mark 1: 4-11**

I shared these previous musings with you because the dust and the musk of the stable lingers for me as we move from the mystery of the Nativity to the “beginning of the good news” as the Gospel of Mark announces in chapter one, verse one. This Sunday almost begs us to hold up in juxtaposition (or perhaps in remarkable complementary fashion) the beginning of creation, the infinity of Creator/God and the amazing physicality and earthiness of the baptism of Jesus, and of course the wild baptismal officiant with him in the water, his cousin John. We have been taught that the finite can convey the infinite. And here in this set of lessons I am reminded in a mind blowing way that the creator of the cosmos walked up to this dusty musty man of the wilderness and got down into the muddy waters with him. So as the season begins for us I am captivated by this image of Mary’s boy, with all that the incarnation of infinite grace means, stepping into baptism, not as a mysterious angelic apparition, but as Mary’s grown boy. Thus my meditation for this entire season is to immerse my mind in this thought – that the creator of the starfields, the maker of light, the crafter of soils, the designer of all webs of life walked into our earthly lives to be with us and thereby show us the way.

On the surface of it all these lessons this morning will present a seeming or apparent discontinuity, or as some will put it - a disconnect. But then again when we read them within the grand sweep of the biblical testimony we will once again come to the unity in message. It is an exercise of reimagining and reaffirming the foundation in our Christian belief. They tell again why we are “Christ”ians and not theists. In short outline what I mean to point out, and what I pray and hope will carry some spiritual nurture, comfort, or even grist for the mill of divine reflection; is that the lessons begin before time in the awesomeness of the mystery of creation, and then take us into history into the muddy waters of the Jordan River. These lessons begin with the voice that started everything, and leads us to the voice we will hear in the narrative of the one named Jesus of Nazareth who gets down into the water to be baptized (to be anointed in that physical water with those royal words resounding in the heavens) among sinners; and the voice that echoes still as water is used in every baptism ever since.

So we begin with in Genesis 1 and Psalm 29 with two testimonies to the powerful voice of God. These two sources are magnificent in telling us of the awesome power of God. Genesis 1 is unsurpassed by giving testimony to God’s creative authority. God merely utters the idea of something that had not yet been – light – and it comes into being. God says “let there be light - and it was so.” Power to create, not even out of something else, but to bring into being out of the void and the darkness. It is a testimony of awesome authority shrouded in the mystery.

Psalm 29 in a very different manner connects this power of God to the voice of storm and earthquake attributing the power and presence of God almighty all around us – and then in a deft move in verse 10 says that this awesome God sits enthroned above the flood. The voice of the Lord bursting forth in lightening, wind, and mighty waters is but a manifestation of the origin that is above and beyond all imagining – and then that this God is your God, the one God to whom you may pray, the one God upon whom you may rely, the one God in whom you will find life and meaning. I live close to Lake Superior and on the fringe of the Superior National Forest. Everyday this psalm reminds me that the voice is still resounding. I listen and wonder at the mighty deeds of my God.

Unimaginable authority and power all centralized, all emanating from this one who we then encounter in a different tone of voice in the Gospel. The story then moves in the Gospels, in particular in Mark with a message so earthbound, so simple, and so graphic in mundane detail. After spending time in the rarified atmosphere of Psalm 29 and Genesis this juxtaposition is almost wrenching and unthinkable, if it were not for our understanding of the incarnation. Because here we listen in on a story witnessed 2000 years ago when God, the one God who created all, the one God whose voice can make oak trees writhe, this God waded into the shallow shore line of the Jordan River to stand before John the baptizer. John had just said that one more powerful than he was coming, how true he spoke. John was giving testimony to the authority of that one, and then the one standing in front of John the Baptizer was Jesus who did not fit the picture of what John had been describing. It was Jesus standing before John, Jesus who was born in a manger, who would be a refugee fleeing violence as a child, and then grow up in a nowhere town, the one who would cure the crippled and dine with outcasts, the one who would suffer and walk all the way to Golgotha. No, Jesus seemingly bears no resemblance to John’s testimony, or the expectations of anyone, and certainly was not congruent with the grand language of Psalms and Genesis. But Mark’s gospel is definitely telling us of the path that God did choose; that God chose this way to step down into the waters; to bow beneath John’s hands, to take on servanthood, to demonstrate the way of compassion and shared suffering, to step into the waters of human pain and vulnerability. This is a day to remember water, frozen as it is in these northern lands where we live, water is sacred as the element God chose for this action we now call sacrament. Every river, every lake reminds me of God’s choice, God’s love.

This was the path God chose, the one to whom you may pray, the one upon whom you rely, the one in whom you find life. This God did not remain a voice echoing above the deep, this God does not remain enthroned above the flood. And yet God’s voice does continue echoing over the waters, we hear it every time we stop at Gooseberry, Cascade, or Pigeon rivers and hear their mighty falls. God’s truth is conveyed through all the amazing grandeur and in the equally amazing intricate webs of life God has made where we can trace the path of water. Every spring day when I plant seedlings of pine, spruce, and oak my spade reveals the webs of mycorrhizal threads transferring nutrients and water unseen beneath our feet. In late winter tapping sugar maples reveals the jaw dropping hidden rhythms of life that have been in place long before humans ever learned the sweetness we can find there. This year I thought about God’s voice of sweet grace quietly splashing into each bucket. And I was reminded that I had so little to do with all this, but now I have an opportunity to be part of the tending and keeping of creations so amazing. And these stories are telling you about this God who chooses to be with you in all the earthiness of our lives. And therefore this story reveals and proclaims the path by which our highest honors, our truest selves, our greatest meaning are fulfilled.

Over and over again in scripture and in life we witness the highest and most holy choosing a wandering Aramean, selecting a rejected dreamer, responding to an enslaved people, choosing a stuttering cast away son in a basket, following a nation into exile and continually declaring that this presence of the divine was right there. And then when we move with the story we see the pattern repeated when the highest most holy creator of all chooses the path of a poor baby in a manger, walks in the sandals of a man rejected and acquainted with sorrow, and says I dwell especially there. This story brings into clarity and sharp focus this powerful and mysterious message we can hear in God’s choice of revelation. This incarnating God reveals what we know in the depths of our being –that steadfast love and mercy, in short, grace, is the highest truth and that therefore in correlation, the highest praise, the warmest admiration. The lasting legends of humanity are not the exploits of the powerful, but the illumination of love in acts of compassion both great and small.

These lessons explain to me again why we find such blessing in those moments when our words and deeds, our hearts and souls resonate and thrum in harmony with the one who set this planet spinning in love, and then, as the Beloved, stepped into the muddy waters with us.

But even more than providing me the understanding of why seeking to live the life of compassion fits so well with souls made in the image of the God of compassion. These lessons give us one more weekly dose of the gospel medicine we need, that God of compassion chose to step into the muddy waters of our lives, that God didn’t wait for us to shape up before dwelling in our hearts, that God got into the water with the lost, the grieving, the weak and the sinners, to prove to you and me that no matter what our days, our weeks, our lives, God is here for us, wading through the waters with us; and that this God is your God, the one God to whom you may pray, the one God upon whom you may rely, the one God in whom you will find life abundantly. What amazing grace that God so esteems you, and you get to remember this with every splash of water. Incarnation just blows me away.

**January 14, 2024 Epiphany 2 B 1 Samuel 3: 1-10 1 Corinthians 3:1-10 John 1:43-51**

Over time I have wondered if Scripture comes to us in primarily two forms, declaration, or challenge. Maybe I should actually say that scripture approaches us in two forms simultaneously: promise and requirement. My father called it blessing and obligation. My teachers at the seminary always described this as Gospel and Law.

These stories we have for today are call stories about individuals from long ago who made a forever difference by their response. In that way these pieces of scripture can come to us as pronouncement of the prevailing work of God that always enters our lives by God’s initiative and our reception. Some would call this providence, or grace. Some will say this is the mighty deeds of God. God’s will is exercised among us. Because Samuel listened to God, and acted upon it, the promise of God’s involvement with God’s people has become woven into the good news of God’s involvement in our own lives. Because Philip and Nathanael responded to God’s call the early church grew and expanded. Both sets of stories tell us that it is God who initiates the conversation, even when we think we did when we got down to pray. After all, who is already sitting there waiting to listen? It is God who shaped us to be restless until we find our rest in God, it is God who arrives, God who descends the ladder, in another way of describing it, it is grace that is always bequeathed even before the need of it is apprehended.

The call stories can function in another way, and not exclusive of the first. The call stories of others can often challenge us to question how well we are listening to God, to re-examine our own response to God’s will in our lives. To hear the story that way does not mean that the promise was not already given. But it invites us to consider our holy obligation. With that I’d like to examine these stories for today to find the wisdom they provide as we recognize God’s action already complete, and acknowledge our accountability.

In 1 Samuel we find ourselves in the midst of strange encounter. Samuel a young child was given to God by his grateful mother and left in the care of Eli, a priest at Shiloh. We are told that Eli’s eyes were dim, but it is not difficult for the reader to know that it was more than eyesight that was causing Eli his troubles. In previous chapters we hear of his out of control sons doing just as they please, outrageous and irresponsible with the spiritual authority they were granted. Furthermore Eli is not too perceptive. When he saw Hannah, Samuel’s mother praying for a baby, he thought she was drunk; imagine that, a priest who couldn’t tell what kind of spirits were involved in a holy woman’s prayer. And yet we see that God’s persistent call will get through Eli’s lack of faith.

We learn from the story that while Eli is mentoring Samuel, a voice disturbs the young apprentice in the night. He has grown up listening to Eli so he runs to the old mentor naturally. The voice for Samuel does not strike fear and trembling in his heart, but must have sounded familiar in a way. Like a voice close to him and so he goes to the one he knows best. ‘Go back to sleep’ Eli grumbles. Again the voice, again Sam is a good boy, again Eli growls. Again the voice, again Samuel runs to him, the kid is persistent! But now a light begins to flicker in Eli’s mind. This hasn’t happened in such a long time. But in the disturbed sleep of a young boy Eli starts to recognize the action of the God who once walked a garden calling for humanity. God’s entrance is God’s initiative; Samuel does not need to be a theology student, nor some devotee with years of reflection and practice. God comes into our lives. And Eli finally wakes up to the awesome reality breaking into his world. ‘Go back and listen my son, tell him that you’re listening.’ Samuel was soon to be the bearer of God’s word and authority, one whose words God will not let fall to the ground (3:19), but he needed Eli, a burnt out priest, to recognize that God was talking.

Did you notice that after an excited Philip seeks out Nathanael to tell him that they have found the one about whom the law and the prophets wrote, “Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth,” Nathaniel’s response is not very promising. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth,” he responds skeptically? But Philip isn’t put off by Nathanael’s sarcasm, he isn’t much concerned or worried about Nazareth. Nathanael must have been expecting fire and clouds encircling a mountain or something grand and unmistakable, not something common or even less worthy. “Come and see” is all he says, following the role model of Jesus from the day before. Philip offers no defense of Nazareth, doesn’t get drawn into an argument, just an invitation to a personal encounter. Like a role model for us all, Philip doesn’t try to argue for Jesus; he just invites. Such a good role model – don’t argue, just invite.

As the story unfolds Nathanael accepts Philip’s invitation to ‘come and see,’ but it is Nathanael who is seen. In Nathanael we see how his skepticism offers him a certain protection, a certain upper hand, when he experiences the unknown and seemingly inappropriate, he just gets snarky. Isn’t that how we all use skepticism: to hold new things or different things at bay. But Jesus isn’t put off, he just meets Nathanael where he is in all his snarky, sarcastic doubt and self-protection. Jesus comes with a divine invitation to a reluctant Nathanael and the rest is history. Jesus comes to us with divine invitation, and that history is yet to be written.

God's call comes when we least expect it, and often to those we least expect. God is always the God of surprises. We, as the church, need to be like Eli as he woke up to God’s activity, we need to be encouraging everyone to hear the voice that calls them forth into all they are created to be. We need to be like Philip with a simple bold disarming invitation, ‘come and see.’ God’s Word was probably not rare in those days after all, but perhaps the skill of listening was rare. Might that be true again? You know it is. Where is God’s voice resounding today? How has God called you to come and see? Come and see in the unexpected. Not in some heavy and thick theology or even in a fine divine liturgy, but in the backwater streets and places where needs and wants are crying for help. “Can anything good come from….?” I’m sure you are like me and have discredited a source of information only to find out too late the truth being shared with you. Where is God’s invitation coming from?

It is needless to say that there are many skeptics today. There are also people who find Jesus an interesting person and may even privately admire him, but who reject Christian faith in its entirety. How can the Church invite today's skeptics into a personal encounter? In some cases, people have been blinded by their preconceptions about Jesus and the Church, just as Nathanael was blinded by his preconceptions about Nazareth. What they have heard or seen about church from a distance convinces them that church is a bad thing, and they rationalize that Jesus is unnecessary. Sometimes these preconceptions seem to us to be unfair, but when honest with ourselves, we can see why. People prejudge church and faith with it without actually getting to know it. The history of the church is indeed checkered and worse, which therefore calls all of our integrity into question. That is a sad truth. It requires honesty and repentance, and action to repair the damages. But current extremes and sins being committed in God’s name by various churches innoculate many from ever hearing the word of grace and compassion we are told to share. And so the Church must also ask itself whether it has failed to offer people reasons why they should "come and see." Does the Church thoughtfully offer people a coherent vision for life? Does the Church introduce people to Jesus? Does the Church live out the love of God? Or does it offer a mixture of entertainment, pop psychology, and superficial spirituality that satisfies in the short term but leaves people empty when the difficult questions and problems of life arise? Or worse, do some groups calling themselves christian advocate love of nation over “love your neighbor?” If we are convinced that Christian faith holds the truth about human life, then we must, in all earnestness, show people how that truth of God’s steadfast love and mercy, righteousness and justice and presence makes sense and is embodied in our own lives, both as individuals and as communities.

So who was it that stands out as Philip or even Eli in your life? For many of us, it is the example of our parents, other family members or friends, who by their own lives invited us to “come and see,” presented a witness to faith that convinced us of the truth of Christian faith, told us to go let our light shine. The Gospel of John reminds us that it is not only marvelous signs that lead to faith. Faith also comes from simple and pure witness. Perhaps we learn here that skepticism and inexperience are no barriers to the Word of God when they are accompanied by truthfulness and sincerity. And perhaps these stories help us understand the blessing that always precedes our obligations. God comes to us even in our doubts and defenses, even in our fears and loss. And by God’s choice and involvement in our lives we will experience the blessing Jesus would later give, which all desire to hear, “blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

**January 21, 2024 Epiphany 3 B Jonah 3: 1-5; 10 1 Corinthians 7:29-31Mark 1: 14-20**

 I am always excited to share a word from Jonah. First, something about Jonah, and then something about us. Jonah is a fascinating prophet. To me this story tells me that Jonah had a passion. Sadly it was not God’s Word, but it was his prejudice, his hatred, judgementalism and narrow view of the world. He was not passionate about his prophetic job. But, as you and I as people of Biblical faith have long known, divided loyalties are dangerous. Jonah’s prejudicial passion was that which led him to direct disobedience of the known will of God. We have seen that replayed since. It was an attitude that endangered the lives of others. It was a stubbornness that withheld the grace of God to a repentant people. He knew that Nineveh was the hammer that would someday shatter Israel into oblivion. Thus, even when God ordered him to preach hellfire and brimstone to Nineveh, he refused. “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city,” said the Lord to Jonah, “and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” Jonah was enough of a prophet to know that God’s mercy is given to those who repent. Jonah was Israelite enough to believe that condemning Ninevites would be a death sentence for himself. Jonah’s life is a parable about how easy it is to become entrenched in our own, parochial point of view, how preconceived judgements dictate what we are willing to believe. There is a natural, all-too-human reluctance to accept that others – who are different from ourselves - are equal recipients of the grace of God. And he definitely does not want to share with people so opposed to his idea of how to be acceptable to God.

The story about Jonah is definitely one that delivers a powerful message. Quite the opposite kind of story the disciples of Jesus present. God calls Jonah in the exact opposite direction of what he wants to do, opposite what believes he should do, opposite what he is willing to do. God calls Jonah to go to the center of the capital city of the axis of evil of his day. God tells Jonah to go to people’s whose reputations strike fear and anxiety into others. And it is to such as these that the Lord says go and deliver unto them the privilege of hearing God’s communication - God’s Word. Yes, God tells Jonah to deliver an ultimatum; and as dire as it would sound, Jonah was wise enough in the ways of God to know that, whenever God speaks to anyone, it is always an invitation to change, to repent, to return, to come home, to be loved. And so Jonah refused, because he knew God’s heart of love, and Jonah hated those Ninevites! No way, he won’t go!

 You know the story very well; and what happened? Well, Jonah with his mind made up runs from the God of steadfast mercy and love, and his first encounter was with a group of tough pagan sailors, who end up praying to Jehovah – to Jonah’s God. These were men who would pray to any god, any god whatever; and now they changed and called out to the one true God ending their prayer with a petition as honestly pious as that of Eli the priest of Shiloh, or Jesus himself in the garden of Gethsemane. These pagans were converted in the presence of God! Jonah then spent three nights in the belly of a man-eating-fish until he prayed the way he should. God then spoke to the fish, and at that Word of God the fish itself changed its mind about digesting Jonah and spewed him out. Get it? The fish repented its actions when God spoke. The story is asking, will Jonah have as much sense as that fish? And thus this marvelous parable of a story is asking, we will have as much sense as that fish?

 So finally Jonah got the second chance we read about this morning. Jonah went to Nineveh and he went to preach to the people whom he hated. He entered the evil pagan city with a simple message from God that sparked an absolute national transformation so thorough that from the king to pauper to livestock – everyone, all in the nation repented, and all turned to the one true God they had never before worshipped. And that was the last thing that Jonah wanted to see – his ultimate enemy, the people he loved to demonize, the people he loved to hate – on them God bestowed mercy; God showed love to Jonah’s enemies. Yes, everyone in this story repented and changed in the presence of God, or almost everyone. Please note the dramatic point written indelibly into the parable of Jonah, all repent, except Jonah. Why, even God repented -- because change, possibility, and renewal are warp and weft of the fabric of the reality of God. Jonah alone did not change, and was left to sulk in the loneliness of his bitterness. Evidently Jonah’s passion to hold onto his preconceived ideas meant that he just couldn’t hear God saying – “All lives matter!”

 The purpose of Biblical stories is to teach us truths that are higher than the mis-representations we devise in our desires. We tell these stories on ourselves each time we recognize Jonah in our own responses, each time a parochial bias or opinion seeks to claim authority higher than the truth we receive from God. We tell these stories on ourselves so that we will remember the response of simple good people willing to follow God into a mission of healing, renewal, compassion, forgiveness, justice, equity, and reconciliation. These stories show us the paths to avoid and the paths to choose. These stories invite us to be open to God and to let God’s Word act through us. And it is so important in these days that we do. We need these stories because there are other story tellers today who are intent on mis-leading new generations away from the truth of God – away from the grace and ultimacy of love. There are others, there have always been others, who twist and manipulate truth for evil purpose.

 We all know of another disciple who heard the call of God and, though he admitted to having some of Jonah’s misgivings, he responded like Peter and Andrew, and James and John. Martin Luther King Jr. in an Advent sermon in 1967 said how happy he was that Jesus never told him he had to like his enemies. As King preached, “there are people I find pretty difficult to like…I can’t like anybody who would bomb my house. I can’t like anybody who would exploit me. I can’t like anybody who would trample me with injustices. I can’t like them. I can’t like anyone who threatens to kill me day in and day out.” But as he preached, he said he could love them! Why? And how is that even possible? Because God told him to, and because he understood what was at stake. He said “hate is injurious to the hater as well as the hated.” Whereas to love is to participate in the higher truth that carries with it healing, reconciliation, hope, life. By loving those who would be much easier to hate, dislike, or avoid, King said “We will not only win freedom for ourselves, we will win you in the process and our victory will be a double victory.”

 Such a story might ask of us to admit the times we have been more like Jonah and less than a disciple of Christ. But the joy of this book is hope. The book of Jonah clearly proclaims that our God is a God of second chances! And a key verse carries the simple message. Memorize this “The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time.” God’s Word renews our call every day to live a higher purpose, tread paths more pure than preference, on a road that leads to renewal, on a journey where the light of life abundant shines, to enter the joy of the master whose steadfast love is everlasting.

**January 28, 2024 Epiphany 4 B**

**Deuteronomy 18:15-20 1 Corinthians 8: 1-13 Mark 1:21-28**

Today we have a little story early in the gospel about Jesus and a miracle, but there is the bigger story under and around this one, much bigger. Picture this: Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-Us, the One who created the ever-expanding universe with a word, just by speaking, “let there be light,” and something far more amazing than just a big bang theory happened – yes, in this story this God clothed in human flesh and wearing a homespun Nazarene robe, has just walked into worship. Not only that, he has started teaching, and dazzles everyone. Imagine that, Jesus is at a local church, they called it synagogue, it was their worship service, and he is participating. That is a powerful detail. The creator of the universe goes to church. Remember that. The author of all life went to church that day in Capernaum.

Who else was at church that day? Who else, well the rule makers and the rule keepers were there. Yes, the super righteous were there, the regulars were there, the conformers were there, they went to worship too. Who else? Someone who was not doing so well, he was in fact tormented; whatever you call it, his life was possessed by something unclean. And just like the others he came to church, to worship. I don’t know why, and neither do you and Mark doesn’t tell us. But that tormented man has just sat through the same sermon Jesus has given; and whereas everyone else is dazzled by the words of grace and challenge so typical of Jesus, the tormented man responds out of the unclean spirit occupying his soul, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”

But I ask again, why was he there? Because he was welcome there – not shut out – not excluded. The spirit-possessed was welcome to be in the presence of God – because we are a hospital for sinners, we are the destination for the seeking and the incomplete, a haven for the hurting; we are not the club for the best, nor a society for arrived. We are there because we need God. He was there because he needed God. And he was in the right place.

God entered their story that day, God got involved in their liturgy that day, God delivered the message that day. Those folks most likely went to synagogue expecting a regular comforting service because it was regular day, but that day God spoke, and the words of God told them of love and compassion, maybe in a parable or two they tried to unravel, (you have heard the other sermons Jesus gave,) but then when a disruption happened that could have spoiled anyone’s worship experience - when the unclean spirit broke out – in a breathless moment Jesus walked the God talk, Jesus practiced what he just preached, and Jesus loved him and set him free, and the people knew in an instant they had indeed been to church that morning.

Okay, so here we are, and we trust that Jesus is here in worship. He has told us how we will experience him – in a child he took in his arms; in two or three gathered in his name in the sincerity of prayer; in the bread that is broken, in the cup that is poured; in the table fellowship that welcomes all; in the least of these our brothers and sisters; in the stranger shown hospitality, in the creation which without Christ would not have come to be – Jesus is here. And we have come to worship because he has invited us. In a day and culture when going to church is less and less the regular pattern of spiritual life, when listening deeply to the story of God told in the Word of God is less and less practiced; this story of Jesus gives us more than just something to think about; it gives us reason to get up and go to worship, and keep on going to worship. And we are here today not only for ourselves, so that we might be able to hear his voice deep in our aching souls, so that we might be able to touch the hem of his garment to heal our hurting hearts, so that we might taste the bread of heaven to regain that assurance of our place at his table; yes, we are here for all that, but oh no, we are **not** here at worship **just** for ourselves today! I have grown tired of hearing he excuse, “Oh, church just doesn’t do anything for me. I just don’t get anything out of it.” An elder friend told me when I was a teen that he didn’t always want to go to church and rationalized that he just didn’t need it all the time; but he went because he came to know that somebody else might need him to be there. We are here for all the little ones Jesus tells us to welcome so that we will welcome the maker of us all. We are here to worship to make this sanctuary sanctified for all the little ones, all the seekers, all the troubled souls, today and for every tomorrow so that they and we will have a place to grow in grace. We are here to be part of the sustaining work of God’s gracious presence among us. Yes, we go to worship, because God goes to worship and we want to be with God.

 And going to worship to be with God means that we see things in a new way. I am seeing in this story that the unclean spirit was found not out there in the world. The Gospel writer is shaking us up by pointing out that the very first exorcism, the very first healing, cleansing, happens not out in some godless world (an oxymoron by the way) but within the church, in the assembly of the people of God. There will be more out in the world to be sure, there will be more everywhere; but this one begins right in the midst of well meaning, sincere, faithful good people. Maybe you have noticed that I have not called the spirit demonic, or evil. The original story is persistent in saying *unclean*. And significantly *unclean* are the situations Jesus will deal with in stories in the next verses and chapters. In each case Jesus enters and restores the sufferer to rightness and cleanness. We don’t know what the details of this man’s life were and what kind of spirit gripped him or the vile and ugly effects that were tearing his life apart. But we do know that we live in a world of unclean spirits today; and we see it every day. We hear the news filled with evidence of the unclean. Who has not been shocked by the stories of vile and systemic racism, and the smears of anti-semitism or anti-muslim actions, or the abuse and murder of indigenous women and girls? Who can accept the devastations of war, the atrocities enacted upon the Ukraine, or the Palestinian, or the Israeli, or the Rohinga? Who can accept growing unclean dead zones of plastic in the oceans; clouds of particulates harmful to human life in the air we breathe; dangerous chemicals leeching into our rivers, lakes, and aquafers; injurious substances injected into our foods; and addictive and lethal drugs flooding markets. It is an evil effect, an evil unclean spirit, and it is the uncleanness of human greed, and anger, and hatred, and jealousy drives it all.

 On that day with all the almighty authority of the One who created all things good, Jesus said, “Be silent and come out!” And the ministry of the cosmic embodiment of God in Jesus of Nazareth began in the particular need of one victim, one man, in church. The ministry of Jesus is very much characterized by healing and cleansing, and by saving and making whole. Jesus didn’t promise that man that he should wait for his reward in heaven. Jesus healed him that same day. What is God calling you to say to the uncleanness rampant in our hurting world? Are you part of a prophetic Word-bearing people who listen, love, and protect God’s creations?

And so we are Christ-ians! We have been baptized, we have been called. When we gather together – that is when we are a *“synagogus”* – we are part of the cleansing touch of Jesus who comes to forgive, reclaim and renew you and me and our world, continually. When we leave our sanctuaries and re-enter the so called secular world, we are invited, and more than that, we are obligated by what we have learned to continue to be part of the cleansing honoring loving touch of Jesus. This story invites imagination to see how we can speak God’s love so that wars will cease, waters will be protected, women will be safe, and justice and peace will reign. This story of Jesus is telling us to expect conflict with evil in the particular; and this story is telling us that in Jesus with the awesome authority of God, we shall overcome. This story is telling us that the kingdom has come near, and our hope teaches us that the kingdom has come here with freedom, light, life and healing. Christ has entered our story and we are God’s new creation.

*Mark Ditmanson is a retired pastor living in the Grand Marais, MN area.  Beekeeping,monarch watching, gardening, and planting trees keep him busy these days.*

