

We Are Us

Psalm 111

Mark 1:21-28

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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.

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.

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Before the Covid pandemic it would have been odd, incredible, and unique, perhaps even suspicious, to see a person wearing a mask out in public. There would have been curiosity and sympathy about how ill they must be to be needing to cover their face and mouth. 2020 certainly

changed all that, and now masks will probably remain a part of our pragmatic health awareness and practice.

The masks stopped us from seeing someone's full face, so we were left curious if someone new we were meeting had facial hair or dimples. Lipstick sales went way down since no one could tell what color our lips were. We saw just a bit of someone else's face and we quickly learned to recognize facial expressions by the eyes alone. The masks kept us a mystery to one another.

As much as face coverings are still fairly new to us, I wonder how many of us have been wearing a different kind of mask for years. A mask that is invisible yet carefully constructed to cover over the less-than-best of ourselves that we do not want others to see. A mask that lets us hide the parts of ourselves that are weak, that have been vulnerable, that hold long ago behaviors that are shameful to us now, that would cause us embarrassment if our mask was removed, or even lowered just a bit.

When Jesus came to Capernaum, he taught at the synagogue on the Sabbath. The Gospels do not tell us what he said, but how it was said and how it was heard. Unlike the Scribes, the teaching experts on the law and prophets, Jesus showed his authority as he came with new interpretations for living into God's word.¹ We can imagine his new disciples and the congregation taking it all in, listening intently, pondering his words and his wisdom.

Suddenly there was chaos, commotion and shouting from a man with an unclean spirit who 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."

Although the bible simply says, 'a man with an unclean spirit,' tradition and art work have come to give us an image of a man, a demon, almost a monster, writhing on the floor, or spinning his head around, or raging and spewing foul language or garbled babble, or being embraced by Satan. He is to be feared and he is dangerous.

But he is actually not any of these things. Scholars suggest that he may have been emotionally distressed, or mentally ill to some degree, or had epilepsy, but he was not someone evil to be afraid of.

Jesus rebuked whatever had its grip on this man and was destroying his life. "Be silent, and come out of him!"

The unclean spirit convulsed, cried out, and was gone. This is Jesus' first public ministry in the Gospel of Mark and he has preached with authority and healed his first person. It does not take long after this day for his fame to begin to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Just who was this man who formerly had an unclean spirit? Was he a member of the congregation, or a visitor from the community, and known to those who were present? Until the man cried out disrupting Jesus' preaching and teaching, there was no awareness among the congregation that such pain and shame and distress and angst was in their midst. Did this man live with an invisible yet carefully constructed mask that hid his pain, his illness, his fears, his isolation, his past, until Jesus' words and presence of authority stripped away this defense? Had he Sabbath after Sabbath worshipped among them and no one knew of the gripping burdens he had masked so well? Jesus healed him, freed him, and he remained in the congregation praising and worshipping God.

¹ Oswaldo Vena, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-mark-121-28-5>

The taunting words of the unclean spirit hung in the air. “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?”

Who is us? Linda Pepe, a NJ pastor offers this answer in her *Theological Stew* blogⁱ “You mean, all the people we are on the inside? You mean, all the parts of us who have come and gone during our lifetimes...ALL those parts are "us" because they still live in us- and "us" have gotten very good at hiding themselves under the skin we are in.”

“What do you want with us!” he shouts, “Because amidst all the memories and hopes and experiences of all the people we are, there are things we don't want to look at. And there’s a darkness in here that we don’t want to relive, that you’ve just touched on, Jesus. There’s fear in here, and pain that we’ve repressed for years. There’s anxiety and worry in here that we’ve pressed down and only let out when we’re alone- there’s hurts in here- some caused by the people we loved and trusted most.”

Most of us have places like this inside of us if we are honest with ourselves. We have become proficient at managing them, and have organized and cataloged them like files or chapters in a book. We tuck them in with parts of "us" that are more presentable, more amenable.

We mask them, cover them up so no one sees what we must hide, what possesses us, what grips us. *We are us*. Jesus’ first act of public ministry in Mark’s Gospel tells us that Jesus sees, frees and loves all of who we are, all of who ‘us’ is, even if we choose to mask it from others. Jesus has come to oppose all the forces that keep the children of God from the abundant life God desires for all of us. And that message matters because it is still the case: God wants the most for us from this life and opposes anything that robs us of the joy and community and purpose for which we were created.ⁱⁱ

Our God is a gracious and merciful God of the broken, of what we mask and what we reveal. God draws close to us in our needs, our challenges, our shortcomings. Jesus is still at work casting out the unclean spirits of the world, and the Spirit leads us on to live fully in this life.

It was in the midst of the worshipping congregation that Jesus freed the man from the unclean spirits that possessed him. It was in the midst of those who had gathered, as the psalmist sang, to give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, where the power of his works was first shown, where Jesus first public act of ministry in Mark is to welcome our whole, authentic selves. That was true then, and it is just as true today. No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here. Come in, come in, all of you, all of us, is welcome here. Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.theologicalstew.com/monsters-under-the-bed.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.davidlose.net/2015/01/epiphany-4-b/>