

Epiphany 4, Year B, RCL
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January 31, 2021

Deuteronomy 18:15-20 Psalm 111 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 Mark 1:21-18

I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart

The gospel writer Mark gives us some “day in the life of Jesus” imagery. In his ministry, Jesus gathered up some followers – Peter, Philip, James and John. We have been hearing those “follow Jesus” call stories over the past few weeks. Today’s glimpse into ancient life takes place at the synagogue. Going to synagogue, like our worship, is part of everyday ancient Jewish life. Into that general pattern of life, a specific violent and passionate event happens. A man full of demons breaks into the holiest of places. A cry from – where did that deranged man come from – rings out in the synagogue:

“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.”

At a time and place when those closest to Jesus do not know who he is, demons know exactly who Jesus is. Complete outsiders to the rhythm of usual daily life recognize Jesus and call him by name.

Jesus does not run from unclean spirits. He does not talk about them in a hushed voice or cross the street so as not to encounter them. Jesus looks at them, really sees them, and stands firm. Face to face with unclean spirits, Jesus commands them out: “Be silent, and come out of him!” In a few words, the man is healed.

Other people of the time exorcised demons, and they did so under the spoken authority of God. Jesus alone takes on the very authority of God and heals this man – this is astonishing – outrageous! Who does Jesus think that he is? He is either the biggest fraud of all time – or he is just who the demons claim him to be: the Holy one, the Son, of God. It is no wonder that the name of Jesus spread so quickly. He is a danger to routine life and to demons everywhere.

This story is not only an ancient one. We, too, are full of demons, and they interrupt even the most holy parts of our lives. Demons, the many things that fill our insides and bring us worry, take away our joy. Our demons know who Jesus is. Our demons fear Jesus. Our demons might include envy, prejudice and anger; a thought pattern of scarcity when we actually live in/with abundance. Our demons do not want to face Jesus, either:

What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?

That question is a good one to ask ourselves. How do we get into the holiest of moments and come face to face with Jesus? Do we dare show our demons to God, proclaim the name of Jesus, and be healed? The twist in the story is that Jesus does break into our lives, and will stand up and eradicate every torment that we have.

Get out!

We are healed from the inside. Even as 2020 presented great demons to us; how dare our routine of life be taken away from us! Our healing comes from remembering that Jesus has continually broken in – we continue to worship, (outside and in), to honor one another, to travel together through illness, isolation, and desolation of heart.

God has not left us. We are still called, as the psalmist writes, to give thanks to the Lord with our whole hearts.

Jesus is here, speaks with authority and presence, can heal us and calm our hearts even as the world continues to infect us – with all of the things with which the world infects us. Apathy. Greed. Envy. Pride. We who have the answers – had none that day in the synagogue. We do have the answer today; part of that answer is to give thanks to God in all things. What are the blessings that 2020 brought us – that we might proclaim and carry into this new year?

Say, in the words of the psalmist,

I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart.

His work is full of majesty and splendor – He is full of mercy and grace.

I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, knowing that there is one God, “from whom are all things and for whom we exist.”

In preparation for Lent, give thanks to God with your whole heart. Worship, as we have been doing. Worship, as we continue – and will continue – to do. Online, in-person, through an app, over a phone, with all the company of saints. Worship. Expect Jesus to show up in the time and place you make for him, and in all times in-between. Expect God to break through in unexpected ways

in unexpected people,

shaking us out of our worries and fears, that we might exclaim:

I know who you are, Jesus of Nazareth: the Holy one of God. I will give thanks to God with my whole heart,

on this, just one day in which we come face to face with Jesus. *Amen.*