

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Well how are you feeling these days? This past month has been something of a roller coaster, hasn't it? It started with the satisfaction of leaving 2020 behind and hoping for a better new year. Then came the craziness of January 6, with the storming of the U.S. Capitol by people who refused to accept the results of the November election, who live in an alternate reality of extremist conspiracy theories, fueled by anger and resentment. But that same day congress worked late into the night and the election results were certified. Then we waited with bated breath for the inauguration of the new president, which took place without incident on January 20, in spite of warnings that state capitals around the country might come under threat by those same extremists. All of that drama took place alongside the continuing drama of the global pandemic and hopeful possibilities provided by the new vaccines. Last week I was feeling mostly relieved. I was relieved that there had been no more political violence and the state capitals remained quiet. I was also relieved to have gotten my first COVID vaccine a week ago Thursday, and cheered by the news that a number of you were also being vaccinated. This week the rollercoaster has leveled off and maybe is even heading down. There were a couple of bright spots. My parents, who are in their mid-eighties, were finally able to be vaccinated, and one of our fellow members who had been hospitalized with COVID was back home and improving. But at the same time the relief of the previous week has worn off some, and has been replaced by the awareness that we're not out of the woods with this virus yet. And now we hear that there are variants developing that might not be as responsive to the vaccines. The polarization of our politics remains, too. Some of the conspiracy theorists managed to be shaken out of their alternate realities after predictions about the inauguration day failed to materialize. But many more continue to be possessed by their bizarre fantasies, refusing to face reality and accept the election is now finally over, that it was free and fair and their candidate lost.

All of these things are largely beyond my control. I can do my part in continuing to socially distance, wear a mask, wash my hands, and stay home as much as possible. But beyond those small steps, the pandemic is out of my control, as is our collective handling of it. Our poisoned political climate and our increasing social disfunction is also something that is out of my control. And there are other things to boot. Global warming has not gone away while we have been focusing on other things. All of these things beyond my control make me fear for my immediate health and the health of my loved ones. I fear for our future, for the future of our children and their potential offspring. I fear for the future of our country, and the future of our world.

It is this sense of our lives being in the grip of forces beyond our control that I want to connect to this episode from the Gospel according to Mark of Jesus casting out the man with the unclean spirit. This is a thoroughly modern approach to the text. It grows out of an awareness that my worldview is quite different from that of the ancient people that Mark was written for. I have never encountered a person with an "unclean spirit" to my knowledge. But I did have a five-week stint as a student chaplain in a psychiatric hospital when I was in seminary. So, I am much more likely to think of someone like the man in our Gospel reading as someone with a mental illness. (And that leads me to wonder how people two thousand years from now will regard our way of thinking about things.) My point here is that I don't think that we have to accept the world view of Mark's audience two thousand years ago to hear God speaking through

this text. However you name them, there are forces beyond our control that threaten our wellbeing, our physical and social health, forces that stoke our fears, pit us against each other, and cause us to resist helpful change. It feels like possession, like being in the grip of malevolent forces, even if our rational minds regard such imagery as metaphorical.

So that's a very educated, scholarly sort of approach to this text and to our modern experience. That's how we Lutherans roll. We require our pastors to have graduate educations, to be diligent in our study of the Bible. You might even call us scribal, in the terms of today's reading. Jesus comes to teach in the synagogue and the people are amazed that his teaching is not like the scribes, that it had authority. This contrast might lead us to think, "ah ha! We need to stop with the scribal stuff and start being more authoritative, like Jesus." But wait a second. Notice two things. Notice first that Jesus doesn't ignore the synagogue and its scribes and go teach in the town square. He goes where the scribes have been teaching in order to proclaim his authoritative message. Maybe the scribes have prepared the ground for the seed that Jesus is planting? Second, notice that we are not Jesus. Notice rather that we in our assemblies are the ones to whom Jesus is speaking, whose authority is being exercised on us.

And that's exactly what happens to the man with the unclean spirit, who is possessed by fear. Fear is a normal response in the Bible when humans encounter God. (There I go being scribal again.) And the spirit speaks not just for himself, but for the whole assembly. "What have you to do with *us*?" he asks. "Have you come to destroy us?" The fear is palpable. Jesus shows up with the authority of a new teaching, and that is threatening. It means change. It means pushing people out of their comfort zones. But it also frees them from the grip of the unclean spirit. The people are amazed and astonished. Their minds are blown. "What is this?" they exclaim.

But of course this is not the end of the story. It is only the beginning. We're still in the first chapter of Mark! These same astounded people, who spread his fame around the countryside, will later turn against him. Even his own disciples will disappoint him. Mark is clearer about that than any of the other Gospels. But even then, Jesus will not stop coming to them. The last thing spoken in the Gospel of Mark is the promise that Jesus will meet them right back here Galilee, but now as the one who has risen from the dead, conquering the forces of sin death and evil.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, "Scribes R Us." It's who we are. We study the texts and pass on the traditions. But we do so in aid of a higher purpose. Our scribal activity is a means, not a goal. We are not meant to be a history club or an antiquarian society. No, we gather in this assembly, now temporarily virtual, week in and week out, centered in the word of God speaking to us through our texts and traditions, confident in the promise that when we do so, Jesus shows up. And when Jesus shows up, he is not silent. He comes with an authoritative word that casts out fear and frees us from the grip of all those forces beyond our control that so want possess us. Those forces aren't going away anytime soon. But with Jesus in our midst, we have voice that speaks more firmly and more convincingly that God's future for us is beyond *their* control and free from their threats. And we are sealed with the Holy Spirit, who empowers us to love and serve our neighbor in all sorts of creative ways.

And so we keep at it. Take heart, dear people, in those firm promises of Jesus in the days to come. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.