

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

We are now firmly planted in this new year, almost a month into it. If you're still someone who writes checks, you're probably not accidentally writing 2023 anymore on the date line. So now that you've had some time to think about it, how are you feeling about this new year? Are you encouraged by the surprising strength of the economy? Are you looking forward, like my family is, to reunions or weddings this year? Both our son James, and Helen's sister Liz will be getting married this year. Or do you have less optimistic or hopeful attitude about this coming year? We've got another contentious presidential election in November, and a population that continues to be polarized politically and culturally. It was only three years ago this month that our nation's capital was violently besieged by people who believed conspiracy theories about the recent election. Lives were lost, and others threatened. Could something like this happen again? Is there anything we can do about it? Three years ago we were also still in the midst of the COVID pandemic, with no vaccines yet, although they would be coming soon. COVID hasn't gone away, although it seems to have now become endemic and less deadly, if still a health risk for many. And then there are the wars, one of them, the war in Ukraine, almost three years old now, with no immediate end in sight. The other, in Gaza, also does not seem close to resolution, with daily news of collateral damage of lives and property, and the threat of that conflict spilling out into other parts of the Middle East.

All of these things that I am concerned about are largely beyond my control. I will, of course, vote next November. I may contribute to a political candidate or two. I'll wear a mask when I visit the hospital. And speaking of the hospital, which I've spent far too much time in over the past few weeks, the health of my father is another thing that has been on my mind lately, though he continues to do better and better. That is another thing that has been mostly out my control, beyond teaming up with my sisters to monitor his progress and see that he gets all the help we are able to get him. Some of you are in similar circumstances with your own health, or with that of loved ones, and you too are keenly sensing the limits of your capacity.

Maybe that's enough with the examples, but it is this sense of our lives being in the grip of forces beyond our control that I want to connect this morning to this episode from Mark's Gospel of Jesus casting the unclean spirit from a man in the synagogue. I think it is the best shot we have, from our perspective as thoroughly modern people, of appreciating what is at stake in this text. Because we have to acknowledge that our worldview is quite different from that of the ancient people that Mark was originally 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.) But 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. You can imagine this as a kind of possession, like being in the grip of malevolent forces, even if our rational minds regard such imagery as purely metaphorical.

So that's a very educated, scholarly sort of approach to this text and to our modern experience. And that's how we Lutherans roll. We require our pastors to have graduate educations, and 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 notice two things here. Notice first that Jesus doesn't ignore the synagogue and its scribes and go to teach in the town square. He goes where the scribes have been teaching in order to proclaim his authoritative message. In the gospel of Luke he is even handed a scroll to read from. So 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.) But the spirit speaks not just for this man, 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 at how Jesus handles this situation. 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, we are the scribes and synagogue goers of our context. 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, 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 to possess us. Let's be clear. Those forces aren't going away anytime soon. But with Jesus in our midst, we have a 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, given in Holy Baptism, who empowers us to love and serve our neighbor in all sorts of creative ways in scary and uncertain times.

And so we keep at it. Take heart, dear people, and be amazed at the promises of Jesus, to you and through you, in the days to come. Be astounded at the love and grace of God that is bringing God's reign back to the world through the death and resurrection of Jesus. And be encouraged by this good news to spread it to those you encounter, both in word and in deed. And as you do that, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.