

Sermon

What is the Holy One casting out today?

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Our Old Testament lesson, Psalm 111, is a psalm of praise and thanksgiving to a God who has clearly answered prayer. It outlines God's accomplishments and attributes. The opening line – Praise the Lord...is not your ordinary – praise God, fill in the blank after that. This was a difficult translation from the Hebrew Bible and the actual meaning is more like, "PRAISE THE LORD" with great enthusiasm and conviction. Let me you show you this way.

When I was about 40 or 42 years old, I developed some bloating and discomfort in my belly. I ignored it for a while but it really started to bother me. I thought maybe it was a UTI or something. So I went to my primary and she examined me, and said no I think we should get an ultrasound. Now this was on a Saturday and it was New Year's Eve. So she sent me to the hospital to get the ultrasound. Well, they read it and next I knew I was having a CAT scan. Everything seemed very rushed which made me very nervous. At that point my anxiety kicked in – they told me I had something on my ultrasound that was concerning. They needed to have the radiologist read the CAT scan and they would let me know.

So of course I'm thinking the worst, I'm thinking cancer. Now the whole time I was taking these tests, in my hand I held very tightly a little plastic molded turtle that my youngest daughter had made for me and said take this for good

luck mommy! It helped me to focus my mind so I literally wouldn't have a total panic attack. And I began to pray – constantly, with great fervor. Begging God to make this OK. Now being the holiday, I heard nothing for 3 days. So in that time, I imagined what would I do if this was cancer – how would I take care of my kids and worse, what would they do without me. Well finally on Jan 3rd my doctor called me and told me it was a cyst and that it would go away on its own which it eventually did. And at that moment, I screamed and cried, “Praise the Lord” – and I felt to my bones what this Psalm is all about. To rely entirely on God for life and know that he will be present with us through any and every obstacle we face – and to feel that deep gratitude when those prayers are answered in the best way possible.

Our New Testament reading today from Mark – we find Jesus fresh from successfully confronting Satan in the wilderness, preaching the reign of God, and now in the company of at least four followers, it's time for Jesus' public ministry to gather momentum. It's time for a fight...

Now we Presbyterians – we don't care to talk about the Devil too much or being possessed or exorcisms for that matter but the truth is of Jesus' 18 miracles retold in the Book of Mark, thirteen have to do with healing, and four are exorcisms. So it bears the question – can our faith heal? And do demons exist?

As I shared one of my many faith stories and as someone who works in a place where health miracles happen everyday, it is abundantly clear that our health and our faith are significantly intertwined. How we approach healing of

our bodies and our minds is critically important on whether healing, true healing, will come.

Most of us would probably not be entirely comfortable watching one of those faith healers who brings someone to the altar who can't walk, is in a wheelchair, and the minister claims some kind of power from Jesus, and the person walks. We'd probably be a bit skeptical of this – let's be honest. Because we've known these preachers to be frauds in some cases. They basically put on a show, right? I mean where does their authority come from to be able to do what the rest of us seem unable to do?

In our Gospel, referred to as the Exorcism at Capernaum, Jesus is again at the beginning of his ministry and he goes to teach at the temple and he is confronted by a man who claims to be possessed by an unclean spirit. Now what do you suppose this kind of possession looks like? It doesn't say he was flailing around, yelling and breaking things – he just says, he says to Jesus "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? " Interesting isn't it? This was considered someone with an unclean spirit. To me it sounds an awful lot like , "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children (White supremacist, David Lane). Hate groups – groups that at their core are only motivated by hate. Isn't that a form of possession? Isn't that proof the demons do exist in this world?

When Jesus releases this man from his demon, there are no great cheers given in the synagogue. The synagogue remains silent. There is no spontaneous prayers of Thanksgiving like I had when I received my clean diagnosis. Isaiah

declared, “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke” – yet in the midst of this – witnessing the bond of heaven and earth – when at Jesus’ baptism, the heavens were torn apart – they are seeing this with their very eyes...silence.

Mark is clear about what Jesus was sent to do and how powerful His authority is – nothing, no demon or demonic presence can withstand Jesus’s authority, his sheer power. Unclean spirits, possessions, demons – sheer hatred – cannot stand in the face of Jesus -

“In this passage and in the Gospel of Mark we are invited to follow Jesus into a whole new world, says scholar Brian Blount, into “Mark’s world of Jesus walking around possessed by the power of the Spirit of God. In such a world you either go with the man and help him create the holy chaos he’s creating or you find a way to do everything you can to stop him so you can get your people back in line.”

So what is the Holy One casting out of you today? Is there something unclean inside of you – inside of me – and are we resisting because to own it, to accept it, means we must change – we must confess that this part of us is wrong, that what is broken must be made right – and we have to change – change our thinking, how we speak about it, and just plain know that it’s part of who we are.

So while our Psalm is beautiful and filled with praise of God and all He can do – “He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the Lord is gracious and merciful. He provides food for those who fear him...” All this is beautiful and

important – but Jesus shows us God expects much more than praises of thanksgiving – far more than “amazement”...this God of ours is a demon-dashing warrior who loves justice and loves creation and doesn’t shy away from chaos that this kind of bad ass living creates.

So I’m going to ask again – What is the Holy One casting out of you today?