

**“GOD IS HERE!”**  
**Mark 1:21-28**  
**January 31, 2021**

*In today’s gospel, a person with an “afflicting spirit” interrupts Jesus,  
and Jesus sets the person free.*

*And where does the miracle of this story and our stories begin? **When we bring  
all of who we are –Hopeful, afflicted, bold—into relationship with the Divine.***

*So come, let us enter this reading with our whole selves –**Hopeful, afflicted and  
bold. Hear what the Spirit is saying to the people of God in Mark 1:21-28:***

Then they entered Capernaum. When the Sabbath arrived, Jesus lost no time in getting to the meeting place. He spent the day there teaching. They were surprised at his teaching—so forthright, so confident—not quibbling and quoting like the religion scholars.

Suddenly, while still in the meeting place, he was interrupted by a man who was deeply disturbed and yelling out, “What business do you have here with us, Jesus? Nazarene! I know what you’re up to! You’re the Holy One of God, and you’ve come to destroy us!”

Jesus shut him up: “Quiet! Get out of him!” The afflicting spirit threw the man into spasms, protesting loudly—and got out.

Everyone there was spellbound, buzzing with curiosity. “What’s going on here? A new teaching that does what it says? He shuts up defiling, demonic spirits and tells them to get lost!” News of this traveled fast and was soon all over Galilee.

*Here ends the reading. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.*

*Verse 1 is sung to “God Is Here!”*

*God is here! As we your people  
meet to offer praise and prayer,  
may we find in fuller measure  
what it is in Christ we share.*

*Here, as in the world around us,  
all our varied skills and arts  
wait the coming of the Spirit  
into open minds and hearts.*

*God is Here!* is a hymn written by Fred Pratt Green in 1978 out of the United Methodist tradition to a tune crafted in 1942 by Cyril v. Taylor. It is hymn number 1 in our ecumenical Worship and Rejoice hymnal, and rightly so, for it is a solid reminder to us that in all we are and all we do as persons of faith, as a church, and as part of the Creation, God is with us in all things.

Writing of Fred Pratt Green’s hymn, Catherine Nance says this:

[In this hymn’s words,] we acknowledge something that so often we forget—God is here in worship and *calls us first*. We thank God for the gifts in the church, through Christ, and remember together that we bring thanks to God for the “varied skills and arts” as we invoke the “coming of the Spirit” into “open minds and hearts.”

Christ is our guide; in him we share our purpose, our WHY. If it is not to share the Good News of God’s unconditional love for all people, then why would we exist as a church at all? What would be our reason for being?

In Mark’s Gospel, immediately following the calling of the four disciples (Simon also known as Peter, Andrew, James and John), Jesus heads right for the place of worship familiar to him in his Jewish tradition—the synagogue. There he “spend[s] the day teaching,” bringing his Good News to all the people who have

gathered. Right away Jesus is reminding the common folk that God Is Here! – with them, for them, loving them, sending them God’s Holy Spirit to add meaning and purpose to their lives.

Jesus teaches the marginalized-- the under-powered--to have open minds and hearts for what God has instilled deep within them—love of self and love of other. That Jesus’ teaching is powerful is assumed in the text. He enters the place of worship “not to be instructed by others, but to guide them. His power is contrasted with the apparent lack of power of the synagogue’s scribes,” (says Gary W. Charles in his exegesis of the passage) and is underscored by the first of thirteen healing miracles he performs throughout Mark’s gospel, the healing of the man tortured by a gang of indwelling demons.

By his sweeping entrance into God’s house and his taking control therein of its teaching, preaching, and healing ministries, Jesus leaves no doubt that God Is Here! and God is active in the here and now of people’s individual lives.

*Verse 2 is sung.*

*Here are symbols to remind us  
of our life long need of grace;  
here are table font, and pulpit;  
here the cross has central place.*

*Here in honesty of preaching,  
here in silence, as in speech,  
here in newness and renewal,  
God the Spirit comes to each.*

God comes to each of us in our own way. In worship, we hear God’s whisper in the symbols that speak to our hearts: in music, in the preached Word.

In sharing our community stories with each other and our children, in listening to scripture, in prayer. We each have our favorites, those ways of engaging the truth that God Is Here! that speak straight through to our hearts. The Spirit hears its call to action and wakes up our souls so that we might receive the message of God's unconditional love, each in our own way.

That unconditional love floats toward us on a fluffy pillow of grace—can you see it; can you feel its softness? It gives and forgives alike, sitting quietly and prayerfully atop the gentle billows of cushions, beckoning us to come and rest beside it. Grace says to us, “Come, tell me your troubles. Confess to me your failings. Show me the demons that haunt your memories and your histories. Feel God's loving presence as the words tumble from your mouths. God is Here! and God loves you completely.”

The gang of demons is no match for Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, sure of his own calling, sure of God's wish for love to triumph over fear, for healing to calm even the most unsettled of lives, for grace to be the balm that soothes the savage and ravaged souls of a life hard in the living.

“Out of him!” he commands, and even the unruly ones heed his call and acknowledge his power, the power of God-Is-Here! “You're the Holy One of God!” they cry out, seeing what the Jewish scribes cannot see, that Jesus and God are one. The demons have no choice but to give in to his holy will, hissing and groaning as they leave the tortured man and run away from the presence of the Master who they have proclaimed.

The cross has yet to have its day, but the astonished onlookers know that something profound has just been decided; Jesus is set upon a path to Jerusalem from which there is no turning back and no return. The way has been set; the

challenge has been declared, and Jesus is not one to back down to either demons nor demonized religious authorities.

*Verse 3 is sung*

*Here our children find a welcome  
in the Shepherd's flock and fold;  
here as bread and wine are taken,  
Christ sustains us as of old.*

*Here the servants of the Servant  
seek in worship to explore  
what it means in daily living  
to believe and to adore.*

Jesus next leaves the synagogue and begins his ministry to the people in their homes and in the streets. When he preaches the Word of God, he is bringing God out of the synagogue and into the public square. This is a huge departure from religious practice of the day, where religious rules and regulations kept the mysteries of God's heart under lock and key. Only the Pharisees and scribes knew the combination; they kept it unto themselves so as to keep the power centralized and well-managed.

Do we do the same in our churches today? Is God's unconditional love a secret we keep hidden under the guise of safe religious practice? Or are we out in the public square speaking of it, demonstrating it especially to those we deem unworthy of hearing it, accepting its truth in our own lives and in the lives of our children? The hymn exhorts us to "explore what it means in daily living to believe and to adore" God. Can we honestly say that we do this as a sustained spiritual practice?

I know in my own life sometimes the “believing and adoring” God part takes a back seat to all the tasks I assign to myself, the demands that are placed on me by others, by this ministry, and by myself— (yes, I can be my own worst enemy). Sunday is at the back of the week for a reason, right? God comes at the end of everything else that commands our attention Monday through Saturday.

Or maybe, just maybe, Sunday is the first day of the week for you and your celebration that God Is Here! comes before all else. I applaud you if this is the case—though I often wonder if this is a sustainable model for living in these hard days.

*Verse 4 is sung*

Listen to this 4<sup>th</sup> verse again:

Lord of all, of church and kin-dom,  
in an age of change and doubt,  
keep us faithful to the Gospel;  
help us work your purpose out.

Here in this day’s dedication,  
all we have to give, receive;  
we who cannot live without you,  
we adore you! We believe!

These words were written more than forty years ago, but they could just as easily have been written yesterday. The days of change never stop changing and the age of doubt never seems to resolve. From the day Jesus walked into the synagogue and claimed our place there as he claimed his own, we Christians have been striving to work out God’s purpose for our lives and for our faith. We gather as a church together to study and pray and struggle with God’s Word. As we seek

to be faithful to the Gospel, we lament that life and its own rhythms of change and doubt regularly gets in our way.

Still, we gather. Still, we pray. Still, we struggle. Still, we seek to know that it means that our God Is Here! and that our God unconditionally loves all people, even *those* people over there on the other side of the room. Yes, *those people* who appear to be afflicted by something or someone, for they don't make sense to us and they don't conform to our expectations—they *must* be possessed by a gang of demons, for that is *the only* reasonable explanation for their behavior.

“Out of him!” we cry, but alas...we are not Jesus and our hocus-pocus gestures fall flat. The hymn encourages us to keep seeking, keep listening for God's purpose, to adore our relationship with our Maker, to Believe! and let God be God.

Let God be God. God Is Here! We are here. The church is wherever we gather and confess God's holy name. “Here, in this day's dedication,” let us give to God all we have to give and receive all that God wants us to know. We cannot live without God and we as a church cease to exist if we stop believing and adoring that God Is Here!

*May It Never Be So.*