

Epiphany 4, First Congregational United Church of Christ, Pastor Mary Jo Laabs, preaching

Mark 1:21-28, The Message interpretation of the Bible by Eugene Peterson

Confident Teaching

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.

My message today is entitled, “We’ve Got Good News to Tell”

Please pray with me: Merciful God, we come to you today, waiting, hoping and guessing at what lies ahead of us. Some of us are praying for miracles. Some of us are giving thanks for answered prayers. All praise be to you as we, without any warning, feel that touch of *your* presence, and the realization that all will be well. Thank you for each little bit of good news that we can share today in the name of Jesus! Amen

On Monday morning, a robin was sitting on the windowsill outside my office window looking in:

Spring is coming! And that is good news!

Can you think of one time when you have been totally amazed? Today’s scripture story is one of the first miracles of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament. Isn’t it odd that we, who live 2000 years later, look at it as *just another miracle story*. In those latter days, the man would be considered cursed, and that the curse was not yet broken... in 2024, we wonder what his diagnosis would have been. Maybe this could be considered an exorcism. In a Stephen King movie, it would bring shivers up our spines.

The healing words that Jesus speaks in this story and in all others make things happen.

Isn’t it interesting how a scripture passage can make our minds wander off in many directions? I wonder if it happened to you today. Someone is miraculously cured? Someone has come through a difficult situation. Someone is transformed.

I thought of a friend who owned a bed and breakfast up North who called to ask me if I would do a “house blessing.” We set the date; and I went to work looking up “*house blessings*” in the book of worship and on the internet. I asked a friend to stitch a small sampler that, in counted cross-stitch, displayed the words of John Adams which are engraved in the mantel in the State Dining Room in the White House: “I pray heaven to bestow the best of blessings on this house and all that shall hereafter inhabit it...” I had it framed and gave it to the owners of Munro Manor.

The day of the “Bed and Breakfast Blessing” arrived. As we walked from room to room in the beautiful old house, we prayed together and lit a candle in each room. There were cookies and tea. The house had been blessed!

Now, I’m going to tell you a little secret. A pastor is not-so-often informed of what effect their words or prayers have had in peoples’ lives.

To my surprise, I received a call from my friend, the owner of the bed and breakfast, a day later!

She simply said: “It worked!” “*What? What worked?*” I replied. “Mrs. Munro is gone,” she said. I was speechless. I hadn’t been previously informed that each family member had experienced the presence of a ghost in the house. Nothing threatening, but it was getting to be annoying. Guests who checked in for a nights’ stay were sensing it, too. At breakfast, many claimed, “I couldn’t sleep at all last night. I felt like someone was watching me.” I cannot explain it but, I do believe that God works in mysterious ways. The ghost hadn’t appeared again.

I do not know how fast that news traveled around Park Falls, WI, but I definitely see why the news about Jesus traveled quickly after his miracles took place.

People would come to know that the words of Jesus were powerful and that astonishing things were happening whenever he was around. I believe that this first century story exposes the power of Jesus to transform this man, which some translations describe as having an “unclean spirit.” He is God. God makes things happen.

We all could use a little transformation. What has held us back from loving one another...what has shaken our innermost being? It just might be that we are living in a house full of the *ghosts* of those past days, while at the same time we skimming over what God is placing in plain sight.

When good things happen, we sometimes don’t notice. *But here’s the good news...*

No matter what happens, God doesn’t stay in our past. God is always right ahead of us doing something new. God doesn’t hold grudges. God doesn’t give us the cold shoulder. A good past or bad, you and I are called not to let the past dictate our relationship with God going forward, because God doesn’t hold on to what was – God reaches out to what is!

I believe this is what the story of the man possessed by the unclean spirit is about. Jesus didn’t jump in and join him in being possessed to share in his pain. He didn’t go back into the man’s life and rebuke him. He healed him and helped him out of it. I wonder who this man WAS, now that he was un-possessed. It is NOT written: The man gave thanks, hugged Jesus and followed him from that day on. What is it that Jesus would call out of us???? Pray that it be released.

Then look around...give thanks for second chances, and be mindful of God’s love and grace. This is good news!

God always has been and always will be creating something new among us. (And guess what? I wrote this before I even knew that the Isaiah Project would be the “mission moment” today!)

In what the Bible commonly calls, “those days,” people were amazed at the teaching of Jesus. They dropped their nets and followed him. They gathered around him to hear more of what he had to say. In the Message interpretation of the Bible by Eugene Peterson *these* are these words in the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 1, verse 27: “Everyone there was spellbound, buzzing with curiosity. What’s going on here?”

For those of you that think that the Message interpretation of today's scripture might be a little weird...here is in the King James Version: *Mark 1:27 And they were all amazed, insomuch that they questioned among themselves, saying, What thing is this? what new doctrine is this? for with authority commandeth he even the unclean spirits, and they do obey him.*

Listen to Jesus, then turn and listen to one another. Ask how you can help.
That is what being the church is all about. This is what God is up to among us.

By the time we complete all of the giving thanks for the bits and pieces of "amazing" that we have somehow passed by, we will be transformed.

May we continue to be known for making good things happen... both inside of these open doors and outside of them!

Turn to the cover of your bulletin, and read with me the words printed there:

Isaiah 43:19: Look, I am about to do a new thing: now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

All will be well...and by God's grace, in God's perfect timing, we'll always have more *good news to tell!*

Take a deep breath. Let it out. Amen