

St. Davids-Queenston United Church
Worship, June 14, 2020
The Second Sunday after Pentecost

Invitation to Worship

Why is it important to gather for worship?

We come because we desire community and opportunity to commune with God.

By whose invitation do we do this?

We gather, though apart, in the name of Jesus, the Christ, united in God's Spirit.

How will we do this?

We will sing, we will pray, we will listen to the ancient stories of how we are to live together.

Most of all, we will love God, our neighbours and ourselves.

And so all are welcome to gather while sheltering in place and in the warmth of God's love. May God be with you.

And also with you.

Hymn of Praise. #345. Come Christians join to sing

Gathering Prayer

God eternal, as we are bound in the tangles of our time, we need some time with you. We are chafing for freedom in the midst of our self isolation. We grow weary and impatient. We have become dumbfounded by acts of inhumanity stemming from unbridled racism. We have become shockingly aware of our own self-deception. We need to be reformed and restored. This is how we come to you, in such need and great hope that today we may experience blessing upon blessing from you. We come to you.

You are strength to us.

You stand beside us.

We are not alone.

Thanks be to God. Amen

Choral Response. #115 MV. Behold, I make all things new

Message: Jesus, the exorcist?

Perhaps you remember the TV commercial which presents a man with a great imagination. In his kitchen window he sees an image of a beautiful swimming pool and himself swimming in it. Next he is joined by friends and then he calls fourth beautiful young women in bikinis from which he selects the most beautiful. The image is not quite complete until he has just the correct bottle of beer in his hand. Images are the ultimate tool in modern advertising, attempting to convince us that their image is what we would like to be. We could all be as cool as Michael McConaughey if we just would buy that Lincoln.

Of course, I can't be too coy, the Bible has plenty of images to inform our thinking. At the source is the assertion that we are created in the image of God, for one. And how many images of Jesus are there after all, in the gospels: good shepherd, lamb, prophet, teacher, baby, healer, and I could go on.

So many images, but probably one that would not directly come to mind; Jesus the exorcist! The first thing Jesus does in his ministry, according to Mark's account, is to exorcise a demon. Jesus is in Capernaum. The people are astonished by his teaching. A man with an "unclean spirit" arrived and in a most

imaginative conversation, Mark has the unclean spirit say to Jesus, “What are you doing here? This is our territory. You have obviously come here to do us in. We know who you are; you are the Holy Son of God.”

Whereupon Jesus silenced it and ordered it to come out of the man and it did! And that was the end of it.

Mark, in this incredible story, suggests that this is the first and most important thing to remember about Jesus. If Mark had to pick an image for Jesus, this would be it.

Now, this is what is called a preachers’s dilemma.

If you preach about demons, people will say, “I can’t comprehend that he believes in demons”.

If you poo poo the idea of demons, people will say, “I can’t understand how he doesn’t believe in demons.”

Talking about demons freaks most of us out. Really it does, doesn’t it?

That aside, there are a couple of things with which I can identify in this passage, something that disturbs me to the very bone. You see, what disturbs me about Jesus being an exorcist, is the implication that there are powers in the world that I cannot control. There are things that are bigger than I am, forces that are stronger than I am, things I can do nothing about, that could some day control my life.

Here we are now in the midst of an illness, the likes of which, none of us have ever experienced. We have excellent hospitals and doctors; we have seen the advancement of medicines that have eradicated so many diseases since the discovery of penicillin so many years ago. We have experienced, literally for many of you, joint replacements, cornea transplants, organ transplants, artificial limbs that function incredibly well and the list goes on.

Scientific discoveries have affected so much of our life, enhancing everything from food production to space travel.

But we now live with social distancing and masks and fear because we have to admit that there is nothing we can do, that any possible solution is a long way off.

So, I am now so very aware that there are things that even we advanced, intelligent people cannot control. We are not, it seems, the supreme controllers of the universe that we may have come to think we are.

So, I am a bit shocked by this image of Jesus that destroys my illusion.

You know the image of Jesus that I prefer? I like the image of Jesus the teacher.

I like the sermon on the mount. You can memorize it and live by it. Or if three chapters are too much for you, there is always the golden rule, “do unto to others as you would have them do unto you“. Or better yet, the Great Commandment, “love God and neighbour.” Follow that and you will lead a good life.

That’s the kind of world that I want to live in, a world with simple rules to follow: a world where with a little effort, you can carve out a good life: where hard work and virtue have their rewards: a moral world where rules guide good behaviour: a world where with willpower and character you can lead a good life.

Oh, I may need courage and discipline, but the main thing, is knowing what is required, then I can do it. That is what I want to believe: that's the kind of world in which I want to live. I want Jesus to fit into that world and the best way he does it, is as a teacher. Tell me how to live Jesus, and I'll do it.

The terrible thing about Mark's gospel, to those of us who want an orderly, rational, moral world, is that Mark says, sorry, but it's not that kind of world; especially when the first thing Jesus does in his ministry, is to exercise a demon. It seems that the "evil" is pre-existing.

Mark says that Jesus is a teacher. In fact, that's what Jesus is doing there in Capernaum, teaching. However, the thing that Mark remembers most about Jesus was that he was an exorcist. So the World Mark describes, is a world in which you are not always in charge; a world in which you are up against things you cannot control or cannot solve, or burdens you cannot carry, bandages from which you cannot free yourself, sorrows you cannot put behind you, angers and jealousies that consume you, dislikes you cannot heal, addictions you cannot control, or a dying you cannot escape.

Someday, instead of being **in** control, you will be **controlled** by things that are bigger than you and powers that are stronger than you. You may escape for a while, not because you are virtuous or good or kind or smart or beautiful.

You will escape, for a while, because you are lucky. But someday it will rise up and knock you down or possess you or wound you or what is just as bad or maybe worse, possess or do things to someone you love and you won't be able to do anything about it. Mark wants you to be realistic he imagines the demons saying to Jesus, "this is our territory".

Look at history. We like to think that progress is an upward spiral; that we are getting better every year or decade or at least every century, and in some ways we are.

Our technology has given us the possibility to do greater good than ever before, but also given greater possibility for evil and distraction than we've ever known.

With each advance for humanity, there is a shadow that accompanies progress, making possible more evil.

Leonardo da Vinci envisioned flying machines to bring snow from far mountains and sprinkle it on cities in the summer to keep them cool.

We got flying machines eventually, but they were used to drop bombs on cities.

Alfred Nobel announced, “my dynamite will assuredly bring peace sooner than 1000 conventions. As soon as people find out that in one instant whole armies can be destroyed, they will abide by a golden peace.” But as soon as they found out that whole armies could be destroyed, they proceeded to do it.

We like to think that as we become educated, we become more civilized, more humane, but it doesn't work that way. Maybe to a degree it does. Education makes us more civilized, but I think the proof of the last centuries shows that education just makes those who are inhumane more sophisticated in their inhumanity.

I hesitate to say this, for fear of being misunderstood, but in the context of this message, I think it has to be said. There are those that will tell you that prayer will solve all your problems, but it won't. There are those that say faith is able to move every

mountain, but it cannot. They say that right thinking and reason always result in a happy life, it doesn't; not always.

I will tell you one of the cruelest things I know, is for someone to tell a person who is in the grip of tragedy, into whose life a shadow has come, who is possessed by something that is destroying them, or an illness that will not let them get well; the cruelest thing to tell that person is: "if only you had faith" or "if you had only prayed", or if you had done this or that.

Sometimes the shadow, the evil, that is stronger than we are, just moves in and darkens our lives. It strikes indiscriminately without warning, without reason. Be realistic about that. It is a rough world out there. That is what Mark is saying.

But fortunately, Mark is not only doom and gloom. Mark has something else to say. He says that Jesus is stronger than this evil, and somehow, in ways that are as mysterious to us as are the shadows of evil, God's love, revealed to us in Jesus, guides us to finding a way to deal with the shadow. God's light illuminates a different way. Mark wants us to deduce from this story that Jesus is possessed by a *God Spirit* not an evil spirit.

The story says that Jesus calls out the evil spirit and replaces it with a God spirit. No matter how the stories of Jesus are told, that is what is happening in every one of them: the Good Samaritan, the woman at the well, the prodigal son. Jesus is always pulling out the evil spirit and replacing it with a God Spirit; finding the God or goodness in the midst of the poorer motives of humanity.

So, what does this story tell us about the here and now. Well I think it begs the question of us, what kind of world is it, to which God has called us?

Surely none of us within hearing and well beyond, is not aware of the answer to that question. We know that the entire Gospel reminds us of the intention of God. Peace, forgiveness, equality, love, a world where when one suffers, we all suffer, where one rejoices, we may all rejoice. For we are one people, the creation of God, created to live in harmony and with respect for the creation. Jesus calls out the evil and replaces it with a God Spirit.

I cannot solve the issue of racism, would that I could. I cannot heal the world from a pandemic. But I desire to be part of a community that wants to listen and understand, that reaches out, offering encouragement and hope and light to those who face restraints that have been present for far too long. I want to be part

of a community that walks with people in times of trouble, lifting them up when they fall, bringing love to their sorrow and despair, wraps arms of love around strangers and invites them to be friends.

I want to live in a world where people can feel the wholeness of the Creators Spirit, where every life is valued and the sick are healed and the troubled cared for, where every child of God has a safe place to lay their head at night

Jacqueline Burciaga writes these words about her relationship with God.

You picked me up when I struggled to get through.

You healed my heart when it was thrown and shattered.

You gave me hope when it seemed out of reach.

You filled me with peace when chaos flowed through my veins

You showed me the light when there was only darkness.

You gave me comfort when my voice cried out in pain.

You reassured me when doubts screamed in my head.

You kept me going when there seemed no place to go.

You sustained me with strength when weakness became all I knew.

You came and stayed when everyone else turned around and left.

*You gave me purpose when life seemed pointless.
You restored my happiness when life seemed to snatch it away.
You showed me the beauty of life when the world showed me
nothing but hate and corruption.
You gave me a better life when the old one fought to come back.
You are always there even when I turn away from you.*

My friends, may we do unto others as God has done for us.
And the people said.....

Prayers

Creator God, you have called us into being. You have invited us into participation in your family of love and hope and equality for all. You have set before us the ancient stories that remind us and call us back to your intention for creation.

Strengthen us, we pray, for the times at hand and the challenges to come. We pray for your grace that we might continue to be for you what you have intended for us to be.

We continue to offer prayers for all those affected by the pandemic, the sick, the caregivers, the families who face loss. We pray for those who protest for justice and reform of systems that deny the dignity of all your people. We pray for leaders that they might genuinely listen and respond in positive ways.

We pray also for our own congregation and those known to them.

We lift them up to your tender love and mercy.

All this we pray in the name of the one who taught us to pray
together, Our Father.....