

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

January 31, 2021

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

PRELUDE *“All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name”*

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning, my friends! And welcome together for worship as the United Church of Christ Congregational. These days I cling to the assurance that, whether we are gathered or scattered, the Spirit of God brings us together as one in the Body of Christ. Joined together like the pieces of a patchwork quilt, we are connected by the grace and mystery of God, so that together we might experience and extend warmth and welcome, kindness and compassion. Together, we might listen for the Word of God and watch for the signs of God stirring about among us. So that together we might respond to the call of God for us, for our life together and for the people we meet along the way.

This past week, Ben and I spent a few days in Helena with our friends Cathy Barker and Dick Weaver. Cathy is the one we heard speak about the UCC Christmas Fund offering in December. And they are also the friends we camped with last summer. In these days of COVID, we talked carefully about the differences of camping in separate trailers and sitting outside around a picnic table from spending time together in a house in January, and then agreed to take extra precautions so that we could enjoy a few days together. During that time, we recorded a couple of songs that both Dick and I can use in our online worship. I’ll share one of those with you in a few minutes, and the other in the next week or so.

CALL TO WORSHIP

God comes into a world filled with uncertainties and darkness.

God seeks out the voids of belief and conviction.

God embraces the wounded and broken.

God knocks down the walls of division and strife.

God is the candle shining in the darkness of our days.

God is the light of our lives.

God is the one who makes all things new.

Praise be to God, now and forevermore!

(based on materials by Peter K. Perry, and posted on Richard Fairchild’s [Kir-shalom](#) website.)

SONG *“Glorious is Your Name O Jesus”*

Cathy Barker, Alice Ling, Dick Weaver

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

Loving God, whose touch can heal the broken places of life, touch us today... God of peace,

whose spirit of peace can quiet our spirits of confusion and despair, reassure us today...

Forgiving God, whose call to repentance promises grace upon grace, place your mercy in our

souls today... You who heal the sick and liberate the imprisoned, who bring justice in the midst of

oppression and strength in the midst of weakness, pour out your spirit of power upon us today...

Open our hearts to new faithfulness, redirect our waywardness, and hold us gently in your

goodness. We confess our need to you, and we turn to you with hearts filled with hope,

remembering the promises you have made to us. May your name be glorified in us and through

us. We ask it through Christ Jesus, your only begotten son, he who is our Lord and our Savior,

our brother and our friend. Amen.

(based on materials by Peter K. Perry, and posted on Richard Fairchild’s [Kir-shalom](#) website.)

SCRIPTURE READING Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

SERMON

I remember having a number of conversations over the years with other pastors about the best way to begin a new ministry. Some of my colleagues waltzed in and immediately made their mark. The first Sunday, there was a new order of worship; the first day there was a staff meeting with new expectations and stipulations laid out; the first week there was a Council meeting and probably a Diaconate meeting, Trustees too if they could fit it all in – all of it intending to say, there's a new boss in town, and this is how things are going to be done from now on. Yes, you have history and I appreciate that, but it's a new day; let's get started. Others of us approach things a bit differently, starting by getting to know people, making visits, meeting for coffee, listening and sharing, building relationships and nurturing trust. Establishing a foundation on which we can build and from which we can work. Even though I have my preferences and inclinations, I really don't think one is better than the other; it's a matter of style and personality.

Sort of like with a new president. Over the years, the first hundred days has gotten to be a thing, so we're currently 12 days into that roll-out, and if promises and intentions can withstand reality and unforeseen circumstances, we have a pretty good idea what we can expect, everything from 100 million shots of vaccine to a 1.9 trillion dollar COVID relief package and schools reopened, travel bans lifted and travel bans imposed, organizations and treaties rejoined and treaties and policies rescinded. The list is long and the agenda is energetic, and it's both about communicating clearly who the new president is and what he stands for and about taking advantage of a moment to make as much progress as possible. You can't change the course of a freight hauling ship at a moment's notice, but that doesn't mean you don't crank the wheel and make a bold new start in the direction you want to go as promptly and decisively as possible as soon as you step into the control room.

Everybody has to start somewhere, and the choices we make say a lot about who we are, what we intend to do and how we will go about it. I guess it shouldn't come as any surprise to us that that was as true for Jesus as it is for us, but it's interesting to realize that we honestly don't know anything about where or how Jesus actually got his ministry underway. What we know is what the Gospel writers tell us, and they each paint a different picture. In Matthew, Jesus climbs a mountain and delivers what we know as the Sermon on the Mount, interpreting the law like Moses did. Luke shows Jesus in his hometown synagogue, reading a text from Isaiah and declaring that God has sent him to proclaim good news, release and healing. John tells us that Jesus begins by multiplying wine and blessing at the wedding in Cana, living into the "grace upon grace" that was promised in the prologue.

And then there's Mark. Jesus' first appearance in public is for his baptism; his first words proclaim the good news of the realm of God and call people to repentance and four fishermen to come and follow him; and his first action is to teach. But we're not told word one about what he taught; just that it was in the synagogue and he did it with authority. Shocking authority that got everyone's attention, and riled up both the worshippers and the unclean spirits. And then the rest of the story is about his act of liberating the man from the evil spirits that had taken possession of him.

I don't know about you, but I don't like this talk of unclean or evil spirits; I don't know what to do with it, and I'm uneasy with what a lot of other preachers have done with it. I don't know if Mark is writing about an early understanding of demon possession or of mental illness or something else altogether. So rather than get mired in a debate about the historical facts or accuracy of the story, I'm inclined to focus on the truth in the story, truth that speaks to us today every bit as much as it spoke to Mark's readers. I've heard preachers define unclean spirits as anything that separates us from God. Lutheran pastor and preacher David Lose said that Jesus came to oppose the forces of evil, which can be defined "as anything and everything that robs God's children of life." ("The Continuing Invitation", *In the Meantime*, posted January 25, 2021) Those are categories that I understand, and even recognize. We live surrounded by no small list of mindsets and outlooks that separate us from God and rob God's children of life: everything from addiction and greed, racism and homophobia, violence at home, on the streets and at school, the distortion and manipulation of the truth. But before I get too focused on everyone else, and the culture "they've" created, it's important to also look inside my own heart and our hearts for personal and individual tendencies to live apart from God and the world God has created. To challenge our complacency and apathy, our fears and insecurities. To look critically at our devotion to the "unholy trinity" of me, myself and I that measures all things in terms of how it affects me and only me, rather than the broader community.

According to Mark's telling of the story, Jesus began his ministry by taking on those spirits and driving them out. They didn't come out easily, but put up a fight – which is something any of us are familiar with if we've ever taken on our own prejudices, addictions, insecurities, stereotypes or obsessions. Or watched someone we love battle their demons. It's hard to change how we see the world or strangers, to let go of our fears or our dependence on destructive attitudes, to set another's well being alongside our own. Mark tells us that when Jesus called the unclean spirits out of the man, the unclean spirit fought back with convulsions and a loud voice; but Jesus' authority succeeded in calling the spirits out of the man, leaving him whole and free.

I'm tempted in this moment to wonder where Jesus is when we need him. We have no small number of unclean spirits roaming about, tormenting a whole host of people, twisting and distorting life as we knew it and long to have it back. So where did Jesus get off to? Or maybe you're more inclined to ask, if Jesus came to cast out unclean spirits, and if people received his authoritative teaching and life-giving actions with amazement, then why is the world still the way it is? Why hasn't this mess been cleaned up? Why do things just keep getting worse?

As I read the gospels, I don't read anything that says Jesus came to fix the world once for all time, that he was here long enough to get every wrong righted, every unclean spirit driven out. Instead, I read that he came to touch every life and heal every wound he could, and to teach and equip his followers to carry on that work over the long haul. In the time he had for active ministry here, Jesus inaugurated God's kingdom, opened up a future of possibility and hope, and equipped his disciples to live into that kingdom now, even while we wait for it's full completion at the end of time.

David Lose writes, (this text leads me) "... to ask what I am doing to continue Jesus' work a month into a new year? Systemic racism, polarized worldviews that tend to demonize each other, environmental disregard and degradation; the list goes on. I likely can't, I know, make any monumental contribution to solving these challenges, and likely neither can you. But this first act of Jesus doesn't change the world either, except for the world, of course, of the man previously dominated by the unclean spirit. Just one man helped, one life changed. Yet it is this single act of resistance and healing that Mark chooses to highlight at the outset of our Lord's ministry. A single act, a single life changed for the better. Perhaps that's where we start..." (above)

One life at a time, we're asked to carry on Jesus work of calling out the evil spirits that rob God's children of life, the unclean spirits that separate us and others from God. So where do we begin? And how? And with whom? Asking that question is the first step, and asking God to guide us, to keep our eyes and hearts open to the places of pain, the voices of loneliness, the cries of need, the emptiness of hopelessness. To wrestle our own demons until we see compassion begin to take root and grow in our lives. To confront the addictions we can no longer ignore. The name hatred and racism for what they are. To refuse to accept that the anger and hostility of this world is all we can expect; it is not all there is and so we insist on doing what we can to usher in a new day. To let love guide us in caring for others, in honoring ourselves as well as our neighbor, in forging a kinder, gentler, more compassionate world. To pray to God, to walk with God, to give ourselves over to the love of God until, one life at a time, unclean spirits have been purged, beauty is restored and hearts are freed to live in love and in joy. May it be so. Amen.

SONG *"The Bond of Love"*

We are one in the bond of love; We are one in the bond of love.

We have joined our spirit with the Spirit of God; We are one in the bond of love.

Let us sing now, everyone; Let us feel God's love begun.

Let us join our hands that the world will know We are one in the bond of love.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Will you pray with me:

(Silence)

Almighty and most gracious God, whose very nature is to be present in good times and in bad; in warm days and in cold; in wind, rain and sunny life; in laughter and in pain; in joy and in despair; in work and in play; and in all those things that are a joy of life, open our hearts and our minds to the realities of the present here and now.

Turn back, O God, the outer layers of our selves, and look beneath the surface to our hidden inner depths. Many of us hide behind polite dreams and wooden responses – not daring to admit to others or even to ourselves that we are vulnerable. Yet we turn to you, trusting, knowing that you will handle us carefully and tenderly.

Turn back the outer layers of apparent courage, and find our fears. Address them in us. Acknowledge them, even as you cause us to acknowledge them before you. Do it not so much to rid us of them, though we would like to be rid of them and free from fears for ever. How wonderful it would be to stand in the presence of your perfect love that casts out fear.

Turn back the outer layers of apparent confidence, and find our worries and our anxieties. Address them in us. Acknowledge our uncertainties, even as we acknowledge them before you. Do it not so much to rid us of these fears and anxieties, though we would like to walk along some waterway and watch our worries and anxieties drown in the backwash behind us. How wonderful it would be to stand in the presence of your perfect love that calms fears, storms and worries. Still our plea would be more modest: to know that you are present with us and that we are not alone in our struggle with worry.

Turn back the outer layers of apparent certainty, and find our doubts. Address them in us. Help us to acknowledge doubts without shame. Do it not to rid us of our doubts, for we would not want to forfeit the growth that comes from ourselves and our doubts, even while we seek your purest presence. So, O God, our plea is more modest: to make our doubts building blocks to a finer and firmer faith, and to know that you accompany us in our journey.

We ask not that you make the hard moments of life easier, except that our burdens are eased by the assurance of your companionship, heightened by the knowledge of your loving care, strengthened by hope, and shaped by love, even as was the one in whose name we pray, joining now in the words he taught: Our Father... (Arthur D. Gray, *United Church of Christ Book of Worship*)

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

OFFERING

We received another thank you note for our Christmas gifts this week, this one from the Wallace Christmas Fund. They wrote to express their sincere gratitude for our \$380 donation, and reported that last Christmas they provided gifts to over 100 local families, which included 247 children. The complete note is attached at the end of the PDF, but please hear the difference that your gifts make in the lives of so many. Whether we are able to give a little or a lot, our gifts help to soften the darkness that engulfs many, especially in these difficult times. Our gifts shine the light of Christ and share the love of God; they build up the Body of Christ and support the work of Christ's church; they express our faith in tangible ways and sing praise to God for the generous ways our lives are blessed every day. Thank you for all that you do, for all that you share, for all that you are.

SONG "God of Grace and God of Glory"

God of grace and God of glory, On Thy people pour Thy power;
Crown Thine ancient Church's story, Bring our bud to glorious flower.
Grant us wisdom, Grant us courage, For the facing of this hour, For the facing of this hour.

Lo! the hosts of evil round us Scorn Thy Christ, assail your ways!
From the fears that long have bound us, Free our hearts to faith and praise.
Grant us wisdom, Grant us courage, For the living of these days, For the living of these days.

Cure Thy children's warring madness, Bend our pride to Thy control;
Shame our wanton selfish gladness, Rich in things and poor in soul.
Grant us wisdom, Grant us courage, Make our broken spirits whole, Make our broken spirits whole.

BENEDICTION

And now go forth into the world in joy. Be of good courage. Hold fast to that which is good. Render to no one evil for evil. Support the weak, strengthen the fainthearted, help the afflicted, honor all people. Love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. And the blessing of God Almighty, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, rest and abide with us all this day and forevermore. Amen.

WALLACE CHRISTMAS FUND

PO Box 304
Silverton, ID 83867-0304

January 20, 2021

United Church of Christ Congregational
408 Cedar Street
Wallace, ID 83873-2229

Dear Members of the United Church of Christ Congregational,

Happy New Year to you all!

We were just given a check from you dated December 31, 2020 to The Wallace Christmas Fund. We would like to express our sincere gratitude for your donation of \$380.00 to our organization from your Special Christmas Offering.

This last Christmas, we helped make this difficult year a little brighter for over 100 local families which included 247 children.

Its individuals like you that help make our community a great place to live and raise families. Your support means the world to us so that we can continue to provide this much needed service. Thank you!

Sincerely,



Jae Jean Achord
Secretary / Treasurer