

January 31, 2021
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany—Year B
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Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Psalm 111
1 Corinthians 8:1-13
Mark 1:21-28

Today is the Sunday of our Parish Annual Meeting. To help keep the service short, my remarks today will be relatively brief.

We're now about two months into the liturgical year that began back on November 29, the first Sunday of Advent. Mark is our primary gospel this liturgical year, but we haven't yet heard a lot from him. Instead we got a lot of seasonal dips from the other three Gospel buckets, including long draughts from Matthew and Luke around Christmas. Now, we're finally settling in more consistently with Mark.

Admittedly, "settling in" may be the wrong way to describe what we do with Mark, the Gospel of spare prose and rapid pacing. This spare prose and rapid pacing is present from the very beginning of Mark's gospel: he makes no time for the nativity stories of Matthew and Luke; he offers no space for the gentle mysticism of John. Instead, Mark begins with John the Baptist at the Jordan, Jesus being baptized by John, Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, Jesus calling the first disciples, and now this. Now this, and we're still only half way through chapter 1.

Today's story is what you might call Jesus' first "mic drop" in Mark. During a Sabbath visit to a synagogue in Capernaum, Jesus teaches the people and then casts out an unclean spirit from one among them. The people realize that something unusual, something powerful, is happening. They comment with amazement on Jesus' authority. But they don't perceive the full importance of the event. It's not the people, but instead the unclean spirit, who really understands, who says of Jesus, "I know who you are, the Holy One of God."

We could talk for a long time about what Mark means here by "unclean spirit." Maybe it's a question of theology. Maybe it's a question of science. Maybe it's just a question of faith. Like most of us stodgy mainline Protestants, I'm pretty hesitant to point to someone and say, "You are possessed by an unclean spirit!" These days, such talk is usually used in ways with which I disagree. For example, maybe you've hear the phrase, "pray away the gay." Well, maybe the key is to avoid pointing at others and instead to look within. Are there unclean spirits that we might ask Jesus to help us exorcise within ourselves? For example, what about *racism*? What about *consumerism*? What about *hopelessness*? What about *unkindness*? Sometimes we even need an unclean spirit to point those things out to us.

What about all the things that set up shop in our brains and stealthily subvert our patterns of behavior, taking us in directions we wouldn't ever choose and don't even like? I'm as caught up by them as anyone else. Some I'm aware of and many I'm not. Some might not even be bad, exactly, but they're still not what I would consciously choose for myself. What if Jesus could cast out all that, and we could put something better in its place? What if we could replace the ungodly with the Godly? How then might we live with intention, for ourselves and for our communities?

This is related to what Paul is talking about in the reading from First Corinthians. As is often the case, Paul is responding to a real issue that has arisen in a young community of Christ-followers. If it wasn't clear, know that he's talking about animals sacrificed to Roman Gods. The Roman temple authorities would sell the butchered meat to earn money. The question at hand is whether Christians might purchase and eat the meat from those sacrificial animals. Paul says the meat is just meat, so *whatever*. But there's a catch: some people are susceptible to believing that the meat is more than just meat. They should *not* eat the meat. *And*, even those who are *not* susceptible should *avoid* eating the meat, out of concern for the ones who are susceptible.

Paul is addressing a concrete issue, but we might still generalize. When it comes to issues of faith, Paul gives the "strong" some responsibility for the "weak." It's about the individual and it's about the community. It's about clearing out the ungodly to make room for the Godly. It's about living with intention.

Yes, today is Parish Annual Meeting Sunday. I hope you had a chance to read the annual reports. You'll note that, unlike past years, the wardens and I did a combined report this year, because everything seemed to connect to the central narrative of the pandemic. I want to say a couple of things about that.

First, as I starting thinking about this year's annual report, I received an email from an old friend. She was helping to distribute a survey being conducted by her teenage daughter. The teenage daughter is working on a school project about the 1918 influenza pandemic. She was looking for people to share stories from that time that have been passed down through their families. I don't have any stories, but it got me thinking. What if, a hundred years from now, someone searches the St. Thomas's Church archives for information about what the coronavirus pandemic was like for us? What would they want to know? What would we want them to know?

Second, it was good to try and step back, out of the day-to-day, and think about the past year as a whole. We are only starting to have a sliver of the possibility of gaining that sort of perspective on things. Eventually, we will have that kind of perspective. But I don't think we have it yet. In so many ways, the life of the church was vastly different this past year. In so many ways, it feels like we had to hit the pause button. Stepping back, however briefly and incompletely, was a good reminder that we don't yet know how we will look back on this time. We are still living a difficult history. For us as individuals and for us as a community, we may find that it was less a pause than it now seems.

A parishioner leader sent me an email a couple of weeks ago wondering whether today would be a good day for a conversation about where St. Thomas's might go from here, what our hopes and dreams might be, how we can shape the world we want to see, what our priorities as a community might be. Maybe that was a good idea, but I just could not get my head around it. I went so far as to wonder why I couldn't get my head around it, and I decided that it still feels premature.

Maybe it's just me, but I don't think we've finished the prep work yet, prep work not only made possible, but made necessary by the pandemic. Maybe the pandemic prep work is not about the building up, but is instead about the clearing out. So maybe the question before us today is more actually more like this: How do we make more space for God? Or even better, how do we allow God to make more space for God?