

## This is January 31, 2021...the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

On behalf of the family of faith at Community United Church of Christ, Medford, WI,  
welcome to this time of worship!

“No matter who you are or where you are on your life’s journey, you are welcome here!”

Today is the Annual Meeting of CUCC. It will be held by Zoom at 10:30 am.  
For the link, please email me: [believe417@gmail.com](mailto:believe417@gmail.com), refer to the weekly email  
or the CUCC Annual Report that has been mailed to you. No internet access?  
You may join by phone: 1-312-626-6799; Meeting ID: 815 8620 0267

**Call to Worship** For the living of these days, let us heed promptings of possibility.

Let us evoke creativities of compassion; let us be poised for flight on soaring wings of faith and love.

O come, let us worship!

-Ruth C. Duck and Maren C. Tirabassi, eds., Touch Holiness (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1990), 174.

**Prayer of Confession:** O Guiding Light, who makes the way level before us, we confess our misunderstandings of the journey. We find it easy to see who we think *belongs* on the path and who doesn’t but, we miss seeing your hand extended to all. Like a vigilant coach, restore our commitment to go the distance. Like the skilled coordinator of a team, renew our awareness that each plays a vital part. Call us again to a deeper love and a renewed vision. All praise be to you. Amen.

**Receive this Assurance of Pardon:** Anyone in Christ becomes a new person altogether; the past is finished and gone, everything has become fresh and new. Friends, believe the good news of the gospel: in Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. Amen.

**I am happy to share with you that, today in our “virtual” Worship,  
three of our Church’s children will be reading scripture: Peyton, Paisley and Tori.**

Today’s scripture is taken from the **Gospel of Mark 1:21-28** in the International Children’s Bible

**Peyton:** *This story is called: “Jesus Removes an Evil Spirit”*

<sup>21</sup> Jesus and his followers went to Capernaum. (cuh-PER/ num)

On the Sabbath day Jesus went to the synagogue (SIN/uh-gog) and began to teach.

<sup>22</sup> The people there were amazed at his teaching.

He did not teach like their teachers of the law. He taught like a person who had authority.

**Paisley:** <sup>23</sup> While he was in the synagogue, (SIN/uh-gog) a man was there who had an evil spirit in him. The man shouted, <sup>24</sup> “Jesus of Nazareth! What do you want with us? Did you come to destroy us? I know who you are—God’s Holy One!”

<sup>25</sup> Jesus said, “Be quiet! Come out of the man!” <sup>26</sup> The evil spirit made the man shake violently.

**Tori:** Then the spirit gave a loud cry and came out of him.

<sup>27</sup> The people were amazed. They asked each other, “What is happening here? This man is teaching something new. And he teaches with authority. He even gives commands to evil spirits, and they obey him.”

<sup>28</sup> And the news about Jesus spread quickly everywhere in the area of Galilee.

**Today’s Message today is entitled, “Amazed!”**

**Please pray with me:** Merciful and loving God, we come to you today, waiting, hoping and guessing at what lies ahead of us. If only there would be a miracle. If only “they” would change. If only “we could talk them into it.” If only... We offer you our humble thanks for leading us when we have no idea of where we are going. Thank you for setting prophets in our path and healers who work little miracles with us and for us. All praise be to you as we feel the touch of your presence, and the realization that something is changing. Amazing things happen in the name of Jesus! Amen

The people were amazed at the teaching of Jesus. In the Message interpretation of the Bible by Eugene Peterson *these* are the words in the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 1, verse 27: “Everyone there was spellbound, buzzing with curiosity. What’s going on here?”

We should all be able to think of at least one time when we have been amazed or spellbound, can’t we? Although today’s Gospel passage might have drawn our attention to the miracle story, think with me if you

will, about this miracle story being one of the first ones recorded in the New Testament. We, who live 2000 years later, are no longer very moved by hearing another miracle story, even though Mark describes the power of Jesus more often than any of the other Gospel writers. And what about exorcism. When was the last time you heard anything about exorcism? In a Stephen King movie? Exorcism is no little feat. It should bring shivers up your spine to even hear the word.

Isn't it odd what the reading of a scripture passage can bring back to our minds? Has this short passage let your mind wander off thinking of something you have heard about or experienced? Someone being miraculously cured? Someone who has come through a difficult situation? Some unexplainable event?

About ten years ago, a friend of mine who owns a bed and breakfast up North called to ask me if I would do a "house blessing." We set the date and time and I went to work looking up "house blessings" on the internet. I asked my friend, Dellora, to stitch a small sampler that, in counted cross-stitch, displayed the words of John Adams, which, by the way, 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.

The day of the "Bed and Breakfast Blessing" arrived. We walked from room to room, prayed together and lit a little candle in each room. We visited for a while and that was it. The house had been blessed!

Now, I have to tell you a little secret. A pastor isn't always informed of what effect his or her words or prayers have had in the lives of members and friends of the congregation. People do not always let me know if I should take their names off the prayer list or if they are feeling a lot better or not. But, in this case, I received a call from my friend, the owner of the bed and breakfast, a week later!

She simply said: "It worked!" "*What?* What worked?" I replied. "The ghost is gone," she said. I do not remember what I said next, but, in my mind's eye, I only remember that 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. One told the owner, "I couldn't sleep at all last night. I felt like someone was watching me." And there you have it: after praying in every room, the ghost hadn't appeared again.

I cannot explain it but, I do believe that God works in mysterious ways. I do definitely see why the news about Jesus traveled fast after one of his first miracles took place. I cannot even attempt to explain such a miracle that he performed...commanding an evil spirit to come out of the man. He is God. God makes things happen.

During this First Year of COVID, have there been times for you when something unexplainable has happened? Anything miraculous? Were there any prophetic words spoken that you could not help but read again? When over 400,000 people have died from complications that the COVID 19 virus has inflicted upon them...would you consider the vaccine to some sort of a miracle? Wouldn't you want everyone you know that they should be sure to be vaccinated so that we all will be able to gather together safely again? Why wouldn't you gladly wear a mask? I dare say that it definitely would be a miracle if everyone wore a mask! Let it be, then. Let us be the ones who perform the little miracles that are within our reach.

In the Gospel of Mark, chapter 1, verse <sup>22</sup> *The people there were amazed at his teaching.*

*He did not teach like their teachers of the law. He taught like a person who had authority.*

People were learning that the words of Jesus were powerful and that astonishing things were happening whenever he was around. We do not have need more information about how Jesus touched the man or how the evil spirit escaped. What we do know is this: a miraculous transformation took place. And there you have it, my friends: this is where today's lesson comes in. I believe that this story of a first century exorcism exposes the power of Jesus to transform this man.

We all are in need of such a transformation. I am not suggesting that we are possessed by evil spirits. What I am suggesting to you is that this past year has possessed us. We have been constrained by limits... of where we can go, how we will work and study, what we can do and what we can say. We have heard stories and have watch news clips like none we have ever experienced. We have been given suggestions, have been cautioned, threatened, and shaken. We all are guilty of blurting out at least a few hurtful words

and withholding our helping hands. Our neighbors fear us and some of our family members and friends won't speak to us. We tend to be so suspicious of one another that when the Fed Ex employee knocks on the door after dark, all sorts of things besides answering the door go through our minds. When good things happen, we can't even recognize them anymore. In a way, we are as possessed as the man in the scripture today.

How will we be cured? Will it take a miracle? Brené Brown, a research professor who has spent the past two decades studying courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy, suggests that what we need to do is talk to one another about what has happened in the past years and during recent days. This is the title of chapter 4 in her book, *Braving the Wilderness*: "People are Hard to Hate Close Up. Move in."

She writes this, "*As we think about our journey from "fitting in" to striding into the wilderness of true belonging, we will be well served by understanding and recognizing the boundaries of respecting everyone's physical safety, and not participating in experiences and/or communities that utilize language and/or engage in behaviors that dehumanize people.*" We need to listen to each other's stories, *really listen*. We need to care about our own pain so much that caring about each other's pain becomes just as important. We don't need to be thinking about "conflict resolution," but, moving closer to conflict transformation.

**That is what every story about Jesus, miracle story or not, is about!** Transforming someone's life. Seeing a conflict through his eyes. How can we even attempt to do this?

Rev Jeremy Wilhelmi, University of the Ozarks chaplain, wrote this in a devotional:

*The past is a tricky thing. Remembering the past can sometimes be painful. Other times, remembering the past can be exhilarating...What's difficult about a painful past is that we either put the blame on God for that painful time, or we believe God was completely absent. The past can alter our vision of God's presence in our lives here and now. 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 even when we're to blame for a painful past. 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!*

That is what the story of the man possessed by the demon 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.

No matter how far we look back, the past has affected us, has hurt us, has changed us, has ripped out our hearts and has made us all act like *we are possessed* by demons at times. As I see it, we have some work to do. If we keep doing what we've done, we will get what we always have gotten. Begin with prayer. Ask for God's help. And then, be amazed as you look around and realize that the "ghost of the past" has faded away.

If for no other reason, do it for the children. Show them how amazing things can happen; that there is good in this world; that all things are possible with God. That God always has been and always will be creating something new among us.

Being a Christian doesn't make us experts at conflict transformation...but we have behind us, alongside us and ahead of us ...God. "*We have a breathtaking view of his grace...we should be speechless in his presence, astonished as we consider the love he has shown us: a love that traded heaven's throne for a cross; a love that celebrates finding one lost sheep and who rejoices over us...all*" this day, just for being who we are. ~These are words from the song, "Speechless," by Steven Curtis Chapman and Geoff Moore

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Take a deep breath. let it out. You know where you have to go and what you have to do.  
Imagine how amazed you will be, when with God's grace, you do something about it.

**Time for Prayer: Let's spend a few moments in silent prayer.**

Let us pray: We need you, oh God, in the decisions we make and in the words that we speak. By your mercy, by your grace, and in your perfect timing, we are surviving one of the most difficult years that any one of us can remember. Thank you! Let us use the coming shut-in months as best we can to retrieve lost relationships and to build a bridge or two. With your help, O God, we can do it.

We lift our prayers to you now for those who are grieving and remembering loved ones who have passed away; for those who are struggling with mental illness; for all those living with the corona virus, those in quarantine, those in nursing homes and assisted living.

We lift our prayers for the medical community, those who keep us safe and for all who serve in public office. We lift our prayers for President Biden and Vice-President Harris that you would lead them and guide them through these first 100 days and every day of this term.

We lift our prayers now for those who are waiting for the comfort of healing to come, we lift to you Phil G, Christine D, Rev. Dale and Jackie, Cathy S, Rick and Teresa G, Jamie H, Angie, and Matt L; Receive our prayers for the children in day care, in schools and universities, and those taking online classes.

Nudge us to a deeper commitment to keep ourselves, our loved ones and all those around us safe wherever we are. Give us the endurance to mask up and step away from each other for as long as it takes... all the while, praying in the name of Jesus and in his words: **Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but, deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen**

**Hymn: "God of Grace and God of Glory"**

**Verse 1:** God of grace and God of glory on your people pour your power.

Crown your ancient Church's story, bring its bud to glorious flower.

Grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the facing of this hour; for the facing of this hour.

**Verse 2:** Lo! the hosts of evil 'round us scorn your Christ, assail his ways!

Fears and doubts too long have bound us, free our hearts to work and praise.

Grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the living of these days; for the living of these days.

**Verse 3:** Heal your children's warring madness. Bend our pride to your control.

Shame our wanton selfish gladness, rich in things and poor in soul.

Grant us wisdom, grant us courage lest we miss your kingdom's goal; lest we miss your kingdom's goal.

**Verse 4:** Save us from weak resignation to the evils we deplore.

Let the gift of your salvation be our glory evermore.

Grant us wisdom, grant us courage serving you whom we adore; serving you whom we adore.

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**This is our time of intention and thanks**

Let us turn our thoughts to what we will give for the support of church's ministries and how we will reach out into the community. Know that no matter the size or the shape, each and every gift of time, talent and treasure will make a difference. "Take your everyday, ordinary life: your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life and place it before God as an offering" Romans 12:1

Let us pray: In your extravagant generosity, O God, you sent us Jesus, in person. We offer all that we have: our worship, our talents, our time, our money and our lives in service to the kin-dom that Jesus came to proclaim. We dedicate the gifts that we have shared, mailed, dropped off or given electronically, in his name. Amen.

**Benediction:** This time of worship has come to an end, let our service continue.

Go now and speak some transforming words to one another...it's not impossible. Peace be with you.

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Visit our webpage: [uccmedford.org](http://uccmedford.org) Click on "Media" for the video recordings of recent Worship Services and this Service! Let's chat: 715-351-0450

