

## “Wisdom on the Way”

A Reflection by Pastor Doug on Epiphany 4 Lectionary texts:

Psalm 111; Mark 1:21-28

Epiphany Series - Awake! Arise! God is Calling Now.

Folks in Grace Mennonite congregation will perhaps remember that when Annie and I first came to attend the church (when Annie was hired to be Music Coordinator in Fall of 2008), I was a high school English teacher in Hamilton. I loved engaging with young people in discussing the dynamics of poetry and stories; and, most particularly, the things we can learn about ourselves as human beings when we study literature, including the Bible.

Actually, my career has involved movement back ‘n forth between teaching positions and pastoral roles. I like to say I have been going one direction along the same highway but I’ve changed lanes now ‘n then on the journey. Both kinds of work – teaching and pastoring/preaching – have caused me to ‘sightsee’ core compelling themes by which I’ve felt motivated and guided to seek to live a rich and fruitful life.

Not that my work choices have always been hugely remunerative, but they have allowed me to enjoy a richness of opportunity to explore lots of rewarding thoughtful things... to work at learning and growing, with others, in understanding things about life, about the world, about God. Hopefully, to gain some wisdom from it all that I can share along the way.

In today’s reflection, let’s journey through two of our lection texts. Read the Scriptures, then my comments; then reflect on the following questions:

*“What words or phrases really ‘take hold’ in my mind and heart?”*

*“What wisdom is in this for me?”*

*“Is the text challenging me to change a thought or behaviour in some way?”*

*“How does this text show me how God’s presence is with me now?”*

## Psalm 111

1 Praise the Lord!

I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart,  
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

Comment: I have heard it said that gratitude is the best heart medicine. Giving thanks for things calms down our anxiety, quite often. And it generally takes us into a 'mindset' or 'heart-space' of quiet humility, because it sets aside pride in self-reliance. Now, self-reliance is a pretty good thing; but too much pride in that can harm our relationships if we become judgmental of other persons or groups.

When we give thanks, we make room for appreciation of others and of God. We widen perspectives. Our compassionate outlook grows, and we tend to want to "do unto others because something good was done unto us." In other words, gratitude is an attitude that can take action, too.

2 Great are the works of the Lord,  
studied by all who delight in them.

3 Full of honor and majesty is his work,  
and his righteousness endures forever.

4 He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;  
the Lord is gracious and merciful.

5 He provides food for those who fear him;  
he is ever mindful of his covenant.

Comment: What does it mean to "study" the work of God? Which "deeds" do we focus on? How do you and I know that something is reflecting the "work" of God?

The psalmist makes it clear that God's actions are full of grace and mercy in tangible ways. God is a promise-keeper who provides "food" generously. What am I hungering for? What hungers do I recognize in the people I know? Or in neighbours, strangers and enemies? Think about what God asks of us as 'students' who are learning to share the food God

is giving. What nurture or nourishment have I received today? And what of that can I share with someone else?

- 6 He has shown his people the power of his works,  
in giving them the heritage of the nations.
- 7 The works of his hands are faithful and just;  
all his precepts are trustworthy.
- 8 They are established forever and ever,  
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.
- 9 He sent redemption to his people;  
he has commanded his covenant forever.  
Holy and awesome is his name.

Comment: When I taught History and Religion in the senior grades of a high school in Winnipeg back in the 1980s, I was also a part-time guidance counselor. That allowed me to get to know many of the students I taught at the level of their personal concerns or questions that they would bring to the guidance office. Sometimes it was about future education and career decisions; often it was also about dilemmas and ‘dramas’ they were facing in their self-identity development or in the complexities of their emerging young adult relationships.

When students would ask how they were to decide what is right or wrong in a decision... or just what is the better of two or more options of directions to take in a decision... I would ask them to identify the reason(s) they might use to determine (and justify) any action they might choose. And I would ask them to speculate about the possible outcome(s) of that action. I would tell them they are standing on a path with wisdom behind them and in front of them. That is, the clearer they can see what ideas or forces are influencing them, and the clearer they envision results or consequences that they will create, the better they can decide what to do.

Since it was a Christian school, I could freely reference God and Scripture in my counseling practice in order to challenge and inspire the students. For example, I could use a Psalm such as this one to indicate how the “works of God” in the world have an eternal perspective. They are

“established forever” – looking back in history and forward in time – for the purposes of “faithfulness and uprightness.”

I’d say, “Choose wisely as you can. But realize God won’t be ‘gone’ or ‘lost’ if you “go wrong” and need to make a change along the way. God is with you, anyway, all the way. Go with God!

10 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;  
all those who practice it have a good understanding.  
His praise endures forever.

Comment: Without going into a deep analysis of the Hebrew language (which I grudgingly studied in my seminary days), let me simply say that the idea of “fear of the Lord” refers to that sort of humility I spoke about above. It’s not about cowering in an uncomfortable posture before a potentially vengeful Superpower God. It’s about seeing my identity – my self-understanding and self-awareness (self-appreciation) – in the light of who God the Creator is, and how God is in relationship with me... and with the whole world.

As the earlier verses of Psalm 111 show, God is present to me as Provider, all the time, no matter where I am in life, no matter where I’ve been or where I will be in the future. I don’t have to *earn* that so much as I need to really *learn* that. Wisdom flows into and out of the exercise of constant contemplative awareness of, as well as active practice of, the goodness of God.

To say, “God’s praise endures forever” is to confess confidence in God’s presence. It’s also to express celebration of how God’s presence is good, kind, forgiving, inspiring... always grace-filled. Always so abundant it overflows. Therefore, something to be praised. And something to share in whatever ways we can. In words. In actions.

Psalms help us so much in finding wisdom for happier, healthier living. How can my own life perhaps be a ‘living Psalm’? A story of wise practice?

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Now let’s look at a New Testament text in order to enter into a startlingly dramatic and hugely challenging little episode that happens in the life of

Jesus early on in his ministry. Read the verses from Mark's gospel below twice. First, get a picture of the story going on. Then, read it again to see/feel the 'energy flow' people must have experienced on that day.

Ask: What wisdom for understanding our world today might come from this event?

### **Mark 1:21-28**

21 They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. 22 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24 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." 25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" 26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 27 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." 28 At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Comments: In her reflection on Mark 1:14-20 last week, Pastor Beth took us to edge of the Sea of Galilee to meet some of the very first followers of Jesus, some fisherfolk, likely strong-bodied and determined individuals who, as Beth said, end up reimagining their identity and values. She said these people decide to "take a risk" when they join up with Jesus and his mission to transform the world by helping people become active in God's kingdom work. What is that work? To share love and mercy with everyone. And this is possible when we open up to a dynamic connection to God, as Jesus did and as he taught. Jesus helps us sense our own 'beloved-ness' with God, which results in an expansive vision of our place in God's good 'kin-dom.' A way of being dedicated to a truthful, compassionate lifestyle.

Ok, so what's the risk in that? Mark 1:21 suggests that the fishermen leave their boats, relatives, livelihood and security only to follow Jesus directly into the center of public spiritual life (a synagogue), where they

encounter a very 'crazy' situation! A "possessed" person shouts out about how this Jesus is a huge threat to the entire community! Jesus, insightful and brave, recognizes that this individual's mind or spirit has been dominated by something "unclean," so Jesus heals the man. Clears up his mind. Rids him of whatever 'fake news' or 'false views' are motivating him. As a result, everyone around senses that a true authority has come to town!

The interesting thing is that what the possessed person proclaims is in fact not false: Jesus is "the Holy One of God." So why does Jesus shut him down?

To get at the whole Truth. And nothing but the Truth, so help us God!

Modern biblical scholars who understand aspects of psychology - especially personality disorders that lead to socio-pathic behaviours – point out how cases of "possession" in gospel stories tend to reveal the way an individual has come to embody (take into mind, spirit and actual physical expression) the spiritual sickness of the society around them.

To understand this in simple (and sad) terms, think of the fact that with COVID-19 plaguing the planet and creating uncertainty, fear, isolation, deprivation and loneliness, things like mental health problems, domestic abuse cases and drug overdose deaths are climbing statistically in alarming ways. In other words, when there is a widespread ill among us in society – in this case a biological disease generating all kinds of social and political distress - it often reveals itself through dramatic destructive acts perpetrated by some individuals.

In the USA in 2019, there were 417 mass shootings. By November of 2020, there were already 578 such shootings. Access to guns is an obvious factor, as is mental health issues. But research [Birmingham University, Nov. 27/20] shows that people expressing personality disorders within an increasingly toxic political environment are significant contributors to the problem. Some people become preoccupied with a spirit of destruction.

It seems that another very current example of "possession" is the way many people in America have become dangerously loyal toward proven false theories about political things. Devoted to a man who uses lies so easily and constantly, people actually celebrate falsehood as truth while claiming those who disagree are victims of conspiratorial lies.

Was the January 6<sup>th</sup> ‘insurrection’ in Washington a wake-up call to show how a whole nation had fallen victim to a false process that orchestrated the overthrow of a dear but somewhat hard-edged man who just ‘tells it like it is’? Or, was that Wednesday in fact witness to a kind of “unclean” spirit crying out because Truth was coming back to town?

I am not afraid to ‘get political’ about applying the Bible to world issues, though I humbly admit my points-of-view can be challenged. Jesus be our guide in understanding our own times, and in acting faithfully, compassionately as his followers.

So, back to the Bible... Jesus takes his freshly scrubbed (maybe) fisherfolk followers into a holy place, and gets attacked by a poor fellow who is telling truth but in a way that actually distracts people from real Truth. According to the psychology theory stated above, how exactly was this guy revealing the illness of society all around him?

He was essentially showing how blind and resistant people can be even when Truth comes home to speak loud and clear. By shouting about Jesus’ core identity that way, the man created an effect that turned Jesus into a Phenomenon. When Jesus shuts that down, people go ‘gaga’ over his “authority” that is obviously greater than other teachers/preachers, since “even unclean spirits obey.” You’d think Jesus would like that.

But in fact, this whole episode must be seen in light of the fact that people later would become very resistant to what Jesus really came to say. In the Luke 4 telling of this story of the possessed man in the Capernaum synagogue, Jesus has already visited his childhood town of Nazareth where he speaks his message in the synagogue there, only to be taken by force to be executed outside town. Somehow, he miraculously escapes!

Yes, we know, as the gospels show, it doesn’t take long before people not only refuse to obey Jesus’ teachings about the ‘kin-dom’ of God, they demand with loud voices that Jesus should be shut up completely. He really should be crucified!

Imagine the shock the first disciples might have felt that day. Instantly they would recognize that, in Jesus, they would be faced with learning to live with a wisdom that required more than knowing which part of the lake to fish in, or how to mend a fraying net, or where to get the best price for the catch. They would need to listen to Jesus carefully, and be prepared for

anything that might happen when people reacted to what he taught. They had signed up for something of a risk, all right! But they also believed they would find, in following this teacher, something rich. Something right. Something true. True now. True for a God-filled future. Life for today. And Life forever.

Hmm, these biblical readings give us lots to think about. And invite us to know Jesus better all the time as we read the Bible, pray, and practice what we hear God say to us in Jesus our Lord, our Guide, our Friend... the One who walks with us on Wisdom's Way every day of our lives to the very end.