

Let us pray... Good and Gracious God, free us from what binds us. Gather your Spirit in this place. Open our hearts to transformation and grace, that we may put all our hope in you... Amen.

My granny, as most of you know, loves to wear hats... She has hats for many different occasions and she has many different hats... All of which are quite fantastic I might add.

My granny also loves pontoon rides... And so, a few years ago for her birthday, we rented a pontoon boat, loaded it up with family, and headed out on the lake on a gorgeous summer day.

For this occasion, my granny wore this fantastic rainbow color large brimmed hat and was enjoying her cruise around Lake Dubay, when all of a sudden, the wind caught her hat just right, and it blew far off into the lake...

Thankfully, the hat stayed afloat until we came up to it bobbing in the water, when Keenan, with his long arms, fished it out...

A once perfectly shaped hat, now has waves that ripple through it, reminiscent of the water that had briefly claimed its hold.

A serene moment had been dampened because of something out of our control...

Such things happen from time to time, which remind us how little control we have... Especially when such things happen, in our most routine of places...

Such as being in church on Sunday morning...

Now, most of the time we know what to expect... We open worship with scripture and silence, followed by confession and forgiveness, opening hymn & prayer, readings, the gospel, you get the picture...

But sometimes we are caught off guard with something unexpected... Maybe something from the children's sermon... Or an unexpected announcement...

But for the most part, church is a safe space, we know what to expect, how the flow will go, and what we plan to do afterwards...

And yet, our gospel stands in stark contrast to this safe assurance...

Our gospel paints a picture of people gathered in a church, just like we are... When all of a sudden...

We hear a spirit say, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?"

To which Jesus responds, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him."

As you can imagine, and as you experienced today, this was unexpected... And this definitely disrupted the flow in the synagogue...

This caused people to stir, to wonder, to fear, and to ask... "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."

An experience that doesn't fit with most of us today... Unless, you find yourself watching one of the many horror films in the exorcist franchise...

And yet, somehow, this gospel can and does speak to us today...

Because what happened in the synagogue that day, whether it be fact or story, is meant to reveal something about Jesus' ministry...

Especially since this is the first act of Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of Mark...

Because the first act of Jesus' ministry is indicative to the core theology of each gospel... The first act of Jesus' ministry sets the stage, if you will... It starts the sketch of who the author understands Jesus to be.

And in the Gospel of Mark, this is not a healing, or turning water into wine, or a sermon... It is a full-blown exorcism...

An exorcism that brings about the question, by whose authority is Jesus able to do this?

And this questioning of authority, will continue with us, as we journey through the Gospel of Mark...

And the question of authority will reveal who Jesus is...

Of course, Jesus' authority will be found in a variety of things, such as Jesus as a teacher.

But Mark's Gospel is getting at something deeper... Because Jesus has the authority to free us.

By Jesus casting out demons in the synagogue that day, we discover Jesus' purpose... Jesus has come to free us from what binds us...

Jesus has come to transform our lives.

Which is why we gather in churches today... Not to experience what we think will happen during the service...

But to experience the living God... To be free of the heaviness of the world, and the many things that bind us.

And though the things that bind us today, are not literal demons...

We are still bound by many things that weigh us down... And we definitely experience things out of our control.

And we are confronted by these things daily... From small and silly things like the wind taking my grannies hat for a ride and a dip in the lake...

To things that are desperately out of our control... Things that hurt us, or change our lives completely... The things that rob us from fullness of life.

These things destroy your ability to thrive and flourish... Which in turn impacts your relationships... Relationships with yourself, God, and others.

Which can lead to self-doubt, despair, or hatred...

And if you let these things go for too long, you will get used to the heaviness, until little by little, you are overcome by them...

Robbing you from who God created you to be...

And instead of living life fully, you may find yourself consumed with grudges, or overcome with sadness, or lost in numbness...

When wounds pile on top of another, air cannot get at them, which stifles the healing process.

And, it is in those moments that you need God more than ever... You need Jesus to name what you have been carrying... Calling it out from deep within.

Letting it take flight in the wind, letting it float on the surface...

So, you can take a good hard look at it, and decide if you want to scoop it up and put it on, or if you are truly ready to let it sink down into the depths, releasing it to God.

This is hard work... But this is work, we can do together... With God.

Because this work will leave you changed and transformed...

Maybe you will feel a little bit soggy at first, but eventually the ripples will get ironed out, or maybe you will decide to put a few more in...

Which we can only do when we are open to the movement and stirrings of the Spirit... When we take caution and throw it to the wind...

Allowing our time together, as church, to not be a place of simply going through the motions... But a place of transformation and life...

Especially since, so much of what we experience is beyond our control... Our days are filled with things that overcome us, and with things we really don't want...

But there is one God who wants all of you... Who feels deeply and knows the pain and heaviness from all that binds you...

Who is there to hold you, to call it out, and name it... So, you can be set free...

Which is why Christ came in the first place, to free us, from all that binds us... Even the chains of death...

In Christ, all of creation is set free... Free to be who God created you to be, and with the fullness of life God desires for you...

May you find this freedom today and all days. May you find God's transformation and healing... Especially when you need it the most...
Amen...