



Everything

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
28 January 2024

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Chris

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 quiet 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 ^[a] commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." ²⁸ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

I was in New Orleans last week as we are now counting down the days to the 2024 ELCA Youth Gathering. We are expecting 20,000 high school students to join Pastor Tony, myself, Pastor Edwin and our high school students on July 16th in the Superdome just 170 days from today. Any of your pastors might need a sedative after realizing we are just 170 days out – all for different reasons. Regardless – we are getting close.

Last Thursday I arrived at the New Orleans airport at 5:15am to the news that the airport had no water due to a watermain break. No water meant no bathrooms. But worse than that, no water meant no shots of espresso. Now you understand my pain. At 7am I flew to Atlanta. At 11:30am I took off for Milwaukee and when we could see Lake Michigan, I was grateful to be so close to home except we did not land. Oh, we tried to land. The plane made its descent. The flaps came down on the wings. We descended through the clouds and then the power kicked in and we rose back into the air. We circled out to Lake Michigan and came around a second time. Plane descended, flaps lowered – through the clouds we descended and then the power kicked in and we rose back up through the clouds. Now I am concerned. What exactly is happening? The pilot came on and said it was too foggy to land and we were being rerouted to La Crosse.

Have you been to La Crosse airport? One person in the tower. One gate agent in the terminal and all of three gates to the terminal. I felt like I was on an episode of LOST. We landed in La Crosse. The only plane on any runway. We pulled up close to the terminal but not close enough to the jet bridge. They filled us with gas and then the pilot came on and told us we were waiting for further instructions. At least we were on the ground in Wisconsin. People jumped on their phones to grab rental cars to drive to Milwaukee and then we were told we could not get off the plane. And as people were groaning and mumbling – the pilot announced we were ready to take off – for Milwaukee I thought. But no. Many options were considered: Chicago, Madison, Green Bay, Detroit. Finally, it was decided we would fly to Minneapolis. Makes perfect sense, except, it does not! Delta was trying to figure out what to do with 157 passengers who were expecting to land in Milwaukee and Minneapolis was their best option. And then we were off. We landed in Minneapolis, and I got on Delta to see what I could do. There was one flight three hours from the time we landed, and one seat left on the plane. I bought it. I swooped in under my fellow sisters and brothers and bought the last ticket – haha – good luck people – I am getting home tonight! It turns out that our pilot that flew us to Milwaukee did not have enough training to land at such a low ceiling of cloud cover, but a more experienced pilot could land in Milwaukee. To Delta's credit – pilots were waiting when we landed in Minneapolis to jump on the plane and fly us home. Fistfuls of Almonds and Sunchips were handed out in celebration and 6 hours after we were supposed to land in Milwaukee our wheels finally touched down.

Imagine the family of the man with an unclean spirit. They cannot pinpoint the exact moment the unclean spirit took over their son, brother, father, uncle – but they remember when things started to change.



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They remember the first hushed conversations with other family members. The questions about their loved one's health. The change they began to see. The chaos of not knowing when their loved one would act up or get angry or "go crazy." In most instances today, we would equate unclean spirit with mental health challenges. But I doubt the reactions of family members who are trying to comprehend the health challenges of cancer or MS or any other disease would be much different. We know the story because many of us have lived the story. We are either the family member who has lived through the chaos of someone we love trying to be diagnosed, tested, assessed, "figured out" by the medical community or perhaps we have been the one to be diagnosed, tested, assessed, figured out. I am not sure there is much difference. What we hunger for as family and friends is healing. What we hunger for as patient is health, stability, understanding, restoration of the life we knew before we became sick. It is not so far from circling the airport without knowing what is going on and landing in unfamiliar territory – hearing answers that bring little peace and more questions only to be sent in a new direction to new pilots or new specialists who might be able to solve our problem – return us to health – return us to the life we once knew.

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If only it were that easy for the rest of us. Perhaps it can be for some. I am always grateful for the news that the tumor has shrunk, and the bypass was successful. I am grateful to know the man who claims his sobriety each and every day. I am honored to walk with the couple who works to listen to each other to find the next chapter of their relationship. And it humbles me to sit across from someone who tells me they are not ready to give up. I know that feeling.

During the second year of my seven-year journey with pancreatitis – around hospital stay number 7 – my wife and I were staring at each other in the hospital room. Pain meds every four hours and fasting for 4 days became the new normal for an episode of pancreatitis. And the question of "what's next" or "what else can we do" were the only words we could pass back and forth between us. And then a doctor walked into my hospital room and said, "you know there is a surgery I have heard of that might be your 'hail Mary.' Give me a few minutes to make some phone calls and I will be back." I looked at Ileen and shrugged my shoulders. Ten minutes later the doctor walked back in and told us about a surgery they were performing at the University of Minnesota. Eight years later, here I am. What have you to do with me, Jesus of Nazareth? It turns out that Jesus has everything to do with me and with you. The healing came in an unexpected way. I am cured of one condition but now live with two other conditions. There is no more pain. There is a new way of living that sometimes is a struggle, but here I am.

I often speak of the walking miracle in our midst. The young person who shows up in worship after the chemo is done. The man who walks into worship and weeps after the heart attack and now walks a new road in a new way. The woman who walks alongside the status of remission but never cure. And the friend who takes each day as it comes – trusting both doctor and God to tend the unfolding story as it is written in test results and experimental treatments while still waking up with hope and gratitude that God has blessed them with another sunrise, another day spent with the ones they love.

What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? In the midst of the unknown. In the attempt, again and again. In the arrival in unfamiliar territory...Jesus is there with us, always, forever. What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Everything. Everything. Everything. Thanks be to God. Amen.