

Rev. Lynne Ogren Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
January 31, 2021 4th Sunday after Epiphany, Year B Psalm 111; Mark 1:21-28

The light shines in the darkness, **and the darkness did not overcome it. Amen**

Following the Presidential Inauguration last week, there was some buzz on social media about the song, “Amazing Grace,” sung by Garth Brooks that day. A friend of mine told that she had written a paper in seminary claiming “Amazing Grace” as America’s hymn.

President Obama led the congregation in singing it at the memorial service for Rev. Clementa Pinkney after the shooting at her church in Charleston in 2015. And it is probably the most requested hymn for funerals, even those that don’t take place in a church.

What John Newton describes in the song is a kind of release, a deliverance from something that had held him captive—a freedom from all kinds of dangers, toils, and snares. The second verse says “’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear; and grace my fears relieved.” Fear has two meanings here.

The first fear is that which makes us realize how small we are in this vast world and how great is the love of God. The other fear holds us captive to those dangers, toils, and snares. Grace both strengthens with fear and awe in the Lord’s power and frees us from the fears that hold us captive.

Mark’s gospel was the first to be written and is also the shortest. Matthew and Luke borrow much of Mark’s material, embellish it and add to it. The challenge with reading Mark is to pay attention to the details he does give, even as he leaves us wanting to know more.

We are still in the first chapter of Mark. Jesus has been baptized, sent into the wilderness, and returned to call some fishermen as his first disciples. Today, they enter the synagogue on the sabbath and Jesus teaches. We don’t know what he teaches, but whatever he said was heard by others as a word given with authority.

We don’t know whether it was what he said or how he said it that conveyed that sense of authority. But then Jesus demonstrates his authority by casting out the unclean spirit. At Jesus’ baptism the HOLY Spirit came upon him, and that Spirit has authority over those spirits that would hold someone captive.

As a young man, John Newton rebelled against authority. He had a foul mouth, and participated in the slave trade of 18th century England. Like Martin Luther, it was a storm that humbled him with the rising fear that he might not survive.

He told a shipmate that it would only be the grace of God that would see them through. He didn’t really believe in God’s power or presence before that storm, but hearing those words come out of his own mouth was a wakeup call to recognizing what he had been taught in church in his childhood.

Newton’s turn from slave trading and vulgar living was a slow turn, but after “many dangers, toils, and snares” he saw the grace of God at work to rebuke the evil spirits that had lived within him.

In these Sundays after Epiphany, the essence of Jesus is revealed, layer by layer. Jesus is the Son of God, declared at his baptism. Jesus is the bringer of the kingdom of God to the world. Jesus calls people into lives of discipleship. And today, Jesus teaches with the authority that comes from God—an authority that transforms hearts and lives.

We don't know if Jesus spoke as boldly as a Martin Luther King Jr. or a Billy Graham. He may have taught as calmly as a grandmother to a child on her lap, but with a confidence in God's power and presence that is clear and sure.

Holy Baptism is the beginning of the grace of God at work in our lives. We are empowered by the Holy Spirit, which grows our faith in the One who casts out our own evil spirits of fear, doubt, and despair. We are marked with the cross of Christ to see us through every danger, toil, or snare.

And we are cleansed from the sin that tries to keep us from God's presence and power. We remember and celebrate that cleansing every time we confess our sins and receive God's word of forgiveness, and as we hear the words that Jesus' body and blood were given for us for the forgiveness of sin.

The word of God is a word of grace, which may seem like a gentle word. But grace is a powerful word that both feeds our faith in God and releases us from sin and all evil. Our responsibility is to encounter that word of grace as often as we can.

We are coming up on the season of Lent. Now is the time to prepare for the spiritual disciplines we might take on for that season. Maybe this is the season to print off that *Taking Faith Home* page and read a scripture passage each day, to hear God's powerful word for your life.

Maybe this is the time to grab one of the *Christ in our Home* devotionals on the table in the narthex and take time during breakfast or dinner to hear Christ speak to you.

Or maybe you will join one of our Bible study groups—a women's circle, the men's early morning study, or the women's podcast group. Check out the calendar and join in the conversation around God's powerful word with others. And if you are already a part of one of these, perhaps your Lenten discipline will be to invite someone to join you!

The last verse of our Psalm today says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who practice this have a good understanding. God's praise endures forever."

The fear—the awe and wonder—of God opens our hearts to hearing the authority of God's word for us. This leads us to a life of praise for all God has done, which feeds our trust in God's ongoing love and amazing grace. May we recognize our need for God's grace and receive it gladly in the authoritative words of Jesus.

Thanks be to God! Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Guided by Christ made known to the nations, let us offer our prayers for the church, the world, and all people in need.

A brief silence.

For all who share the gospel and proclaim freedom in Christ throughout the world: prophets, teachers, pastors, deacons, and lay leaders; for the church and its ministries, especially Bradn Buerkle as he continues his missionary work in Russia, let us pray.

Have mercy, O God.

For government and leaders: cities and nations, rescue professionals and legal aid attorneys, elected officials and grassroots organizers; for all who are responsible for the well-being of civil society, let us pray.

Have mercy, O God.

For those who suffer in mind, body, or spirit: those who are sick and hospitalized, those struggling with mental illness, those who are hungry or homeless, and all in any need, especially those named on our prayer list today, let us pray.

Have mercy, O God.

We praise you for the development of COVID-19 vaccines, and we pray for their fair and prompt distribution. Visit all who have contracted the coronavirus and all who are experiencing the long-term effects of COVID-19. Give strength to community health district workers and medical personnel. Let us pray,

Have mercy, O God.

For the covenant God made with us in the waters of baptism, in thanksgiving for the baptized who have died in the Lord, especially Bob Papp and Jacob Simpson.

Unite us with all these, your beloved children, through our memories and at the end of time in your presence. Let us pray.

Have mercy, O God.

Merciful God, hear the prayers of your people, spoken or silent, for the sake of the one who dwells among us, your Son, Jesus Christ our Savior.

Amen.