

## “The Holy One of God”

Deuteronomy 18:15-20 • Psalm 111 • 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 • Mark 1:21-28

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason, Michigan

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We’re going to spend most of time this morning considering the passage from Mark’s Gospel about Jesus healing the man with the unclean spirit, but before we go there we’re going to look briefly at each of the other passages. There’s something remarkable about each of them.

Let’s start with the Psalm. On the surface, this looks like a simple song of praise to God. “Praise the Lord!” it begins; “I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart.” The psalm lists a number of attributes or actions of God that the Psalmist feels are worthy of praise. It’s great stuff; most of the lines here are ones we can reiterate without hesitation. But what’s truly remarkable about this Psalm is not at all evident in English. It’s a poem, a Hebrew poem, and when you look at this poem in the original Hebrew, there is a symmetry, a pattern, that truly gets lost in the translation. There’s an introductory phrase – *hallelu yah* – “praise the Lord” – that’s where we get our word “Hallelujah.” Each line of the poem after that is made up of two or three short clauses consisting of about three or four words, and each of those clauses begins with a particular letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The first clause begins with the letter *aleph*, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The second clause begins with the letter *beth*, the second letter. The third clause begins with the third letter, *gimel*; the fourth clause begins with the fourth letter, *dalet*, and so on, all the way through to *tav*, the twenty-second and final letter of the Hebrew alphabet. None of that is visible in English – but it is *plainly* visible in the Hebrew. This poem was constructed with a great deal of literary artistry. It would be like if one of you were to write a poem, beginning with “Praise the Lord!”, then continuing with twenty-six short clauses, the first starting with the letter “A” and the last starting with the letter “Z,” each clause praising God. It truly is remarkable!

Now, to the Deuteronomy passage: Moses tells the people that God will “raise up” a prophet like him, and put God’s words into the mouth of that prophet, who will speak to the people everything that God commands. That is what a prophet is – someone who speaks on behalf of God. When Christians read this passage, we see a reference to Jesus, who was a faithful prophet of God, and much more. Of course, that’s not how Jews understand this passage. In traditional Jewish understanding, there were 55 prophets in ancient Israel whose prophecies have eternal relevance: 48 men, from Abraham to Malachi, and seven women – Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah, and Esther. Jews believe that authentic prophecy ended when the second temple was built in Jerusalem, about 500 years before Jesus. We would say that God used those 500 years to prepare people’s hearts for the coming of the Messiah.

Next up: the passage from 1 Corinthians, about whether it’s appropriate to eat food sacrificed to idols. This is a hard one for us to wrap our minds around. In the world of the first century, there were temples to Greek gods and goddesses in every major city, and many cities had multiple temples. Five

Greek gods are mentioned by name in the New Testament – Zeus (or Jupiter), the ruler of the gods; Hermes (or Mercury), the messenger of the gods; the twin gods Castor and Pollux, also known as “Gemini”; and Artemis (or Diana), the goddess of the hunt. These gods – and many more – had temples in various places, and in those temples animals were sacrificed to those gods, and those sacrifices were cooked and became food. Sometimes people ate that meat in the temples – like the way we eat meals here in our church – and sometimes that meat was sold in the marketplaces. The question was, is it okay for Christians to eat meat that had been sacrificed to a Greek god or goddess? Paul’s answer is interesting: *there’s nothing inherently wrong with that*, because from a Christian point of view those gods *don’t really exist as gods*, even if many people *think* they do. It was perfectly acceptable, in his opinion, for a Christian to eat meat that had been sacrificed to a pagan god, so long as the person eating *knows* that god doesn’t really exist. But he tempered that basic principle with concern for people who were less educated, or people for whom the Christian faith was new. He was concerned that some of those people might *feel like they were doing something wrong* if they ate meat that had been sacrificed to a pagan god, and that might cause them to stumble in their Christian walk of faith. Paul doesn’t want that to happen, so he encourages people *not* to eat meat sacrificed to a pagan god whenever there might be Christians around who don’t fully *understand* the truth about those gods. It’s fascinating. Paul is encouraging Christians to reflect on how *their* actions might negatively affect the faith development of *other* Christians. It’s about Christian *liberty*. Just because we have the *liberty* to do something doesn’t make it *right*. We have to consider how what *we* do might hinder some *other* Christian’s walk of faith.

Now to the Gospel. This is one of the first stories in Mark’s Gospel; it’s the first public thing Jesus *does* in his ministry, in Mark’s version of the story. The setting is the synagogue in Capernaum. Capernaum was a fishing village at the northern end of the Sea of Galilee. At the time of Jesus, about 1500 people lived here. Ruins of a portion of the ancient city still exist today; you’re looking here at a residential neighborhood. There’s a narrow street, and homes made from basalt blocks reinforced with stone and mud. The floors were cobbled, and the roofs – which obviously haven’t survived – were made from wooden planks and thatch. Family groups lived in clusters, with individual homes surrounding a shared courtyard. You have to imagine the sounds of children playing and laughing in the streets.

The remains of the synagogue in Capernaum have also survived, although they date from the fourth century, not the first. Here’s another view. People would sit on those stone benches along the wall. This synagogue featured ornate columns, and white blocks of limestone that had been brought here from somewhere else. You can tell the difference between these fancy stones and the darker, rougher stones used in the first century. Underneath the foundation of this synagogue is another, older, foundation; this synagogue was probably built on the spot where the first-century synagogue had stood.

Jewish synagogues were very prevalent in Palestine during the time of Jesus. There were synagogues in cities and villages and towns all up and down the land. This is where the common people went to worship on the Sabbath day: they prayed, sang, heard readings from the Law and the Prophets, and listened to a rabbi explain and interpret God’s Word. It was very, very much like what we Christians do today, on *our* Sabbath day, in houses of worship like this one. The remains of about ten synagogues from the time of Jesus have survived; one of the best-preserved is in Magdala, another fishing village along the Sea of Galilee. This one was only unearthed about 15 years ago, but it is stunning; you can clearly see the layout of the room, the original stonework, and the benches where people sat. It is *extraordinarily* likely that Jesus worshiped in *this* synagogue during his travels around Galilee.

So imagine a synagogue like this when you hear this story. “When the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.” The rabbi gave Jesus an opportunity to talk about the scriptures. “They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes.” Every rabbi, every priest, every pastor *wishes* we had it all figured out. There are lots of things we don’t know, questions that come up that we don’t have answers for. There are times I wish Jesus would just clearly reveal the meaning of some obscure verse. Every rabbi, priest, and pastor who’s honest would tell you that’s true for them as well. But that day in Capernaum, almost everybody was *astounded* at the *authority* Jesus displayed. One man felt differently: a man “with an unclean spirit.” That word “unclean” means “impure.” It implies there is something *demonic* going on. Of course the *demons* would feel threatened by Jesus. They weren’t afraid of the rabbis – the rabbis had no power over them! The unclean spirit that was inhabiting this man’s soul recognized Jesus for who and what he was. It cries out: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” It asks: “Have you come to destroy us?” And it declares: “I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” It was right. Jesus is the Holy One of God.

Those Greek gods that I was talking about a few minutes ago – those weren’t really *real*. Demons, on the other hand – demons and unclean spirits *are* real. The New Testament consistently talks about the invisible, unseen “powers and principalities” in the universe, angels and demons of various kinds. Our modern minds sometimes want to say that those are no more real than the so-called gods and goddesses the Greeks and Romans worshiped. Be careful here. Jesus himself talks about angels, demons, and the devil numerous times, and never once questions their existence. Paul says that “our struggle is not against blood and flesh but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (Eph. 6:12) Doesn’t that make sense to you? How else do you explain the truly *evil* things that some people do in this world? To take just one example – how do you explain what happened at Oxford High School two years ago? The perpetrator had written, “The thoughts won’t stop. Help me.” He needed mental help, clearly. But I’m inclined to think there was also something *demonic* going on. There are *spiritual forces of darkness* that try to claim our souls and twist us into someone God did not create us to be.

The spiritual forces of darkness had claimed the soul of this man in Capernaum. He was held in the grip of an unclean spirit. Whether or not he was dangerous, I have no idea. The text doesn’t suggest that. But the spirit *clearly* perceived Jesus as a threat. And Jesus was absolutely *not* willing to let this man remain as he was. “Be quiet,” Jesus commanded, “and come out of him!” Jesus saw darkness in this man’s soul and *did something about it*. The man was given no say in the matter. *That unclean spirit had to go*. And it went! “The unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.” One command from Jesus, and the unclean spirit is *gone*. The man is restored to his right mind. Everybody is amazed. They had been amazed at Jesus’s teaching; they are even *more* amazed at this. Here is a man who can *command the unclean spirits*. Here is a man with *authority*. The *power of God*.

What do we do with this passage? Believe me, I’m not going to teach you how to perform exorcisms. God did not give me that spiritual gift. There may be some people who have it, but I am most certainly not one of them. But that doesn’t mean I don’t *believe*. I *do* believe there are demons and unclean spirits. And I most *certainly* believe that they have *no chance* against Jesus. None at *all*. For *he’s* the one who’s got the power. *He’s* the one whose got the authority. *He’s* the one who rules over *all*.

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