

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

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Real Magic

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At the end of the pandemic, when many people breathed a sigh relief, comedienne Kate McKinnon claimed the opposite.

If you've seen her talent on Saturday Night Live or more recently as Weird Barbie in the *Barbie* movie, you know she doesn't shy away from saying what many of us would never utter or playing characters that embody the uncomfortable truths about life.

When restrictions eased and people started to talk about getting back to "normal," McKinnon described the source of her melancholy as though, "getting to the end of a long tunnel and finally seeing a light. That light, signaling the end, also was shining brightly on the stinky trashy ways we live."

Pick any of the evils from that time.

That's the way with light. It may draw us from despair, but not without exposing what we'd hidden, or ignored, or denied.

And the same is true of epiphany.

Epiphany marks the final of three seasons in our faith calendar defined with light. These seasons coincide with the ten darkest weeks of the northern hemisphere. The spiritual flow begins with ever-increasing darkness. When we observe

Advent in December, we light candles of hope and joy as the night grows longer. Near the longest night of the year, Christmas, we celebrate the light of Christ in this life and his promise of new life beyond the sunset of death.

During Epiphany we hear stories of Jesus. His light lures us out of hiding, but not without first spotlighting the things – beliefs, behaviors, separations – that stifle us.

Today's reading comes from the Gospel of Mark.

As a reminder, Mark tells the good news of Jesus without any birth narrative, genealogy, or divine oracle. This writer reports that at Jesus' baptism, the heavens break apart, the spirit descends and God speaks, for Jesus alone to hear.

After his baptism, no one suspects Jesus is anything other than an ordinary Jew in Galilee. This man of mystery calls four disciples to follow him. Before I read about his first day of ministry, please pray with me.

Dear God,

We seek to know your son and to follow his ways.

And we know it will expose us, it may cost us. Help us.

Hold us with tenderness as we hear these words.

Give us courage to be fully present to you

and the authority you give to him. Amen.

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 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 commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”

²⁸ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Nate Staniforth explores wonder, mystery, spirituality, and science. A TED talk, numerous podcasts, and lectures at Oxford lift up the authority in this confluence of disciplines he gained from his profession.

Staniforth appears at night clubs. He makes his living as a magician.

One reporter wrote after an opening night, "I have no idea what to believe about anything ever again. No rabbits. No top hats. No smoke machines. Staniforth's shows feel more like jumping out of an airplane."¹

He abandons the ubiquitous style-without-substance bravado so often associated with magic and appeals instead to the imagination and intellect of his audience.

Staniforth says, "When you're young, it's easy to be amazed...As you get older, that experience of astonishment gets harder and harder to find. Good magic isn't about deception. It's about trying to see things."

His act is wild, visceral and immediate, and like all great art, encourages us to open our minds and hearts, and see the world in new ways.

¹ <https://www.natestaniforth.com/#titles>

It surprised me to learn that magicians provoke wide-ranging emotions.

Even when we seek to be entertained by tricks that defy the laws of gravity or disturb our sense of order with new possibility, the impact unnerves us, arousing everything from delight to anger. Yes, anger. That surprised me.

Let me turn to Staniforth's own words.

The anger toward the modern magician comes from the way a simple magic trick, done well, can reach uninvited to the deepest hopes of a person. Sometimes this can be an uncomfortable reminder that people have hard lives.

And something like magic that promises us a moment of real joy or a new way of seeing the world threatens to unseat whatever insulation they have managed to erect between themselves and that hardness, whether it is cynicism, nihilism, escapism or elitism.

The cultural resentment toward magic comes from the sadness found in the space between the universal human longing to believe in magic and the overwhelming evidence all around us that there is no

such thing. It's not that a modern audience doesn't want magic, it's that they want it so badly but have already decided that it is not out there and they dislike being told that maybe they were looking in the wrong place.²

This passion to find the source of meaning and authority in our lives puts us right alongside those gathered at a synagogue in Capernaum two thousand years ago.

At the time, a synagogue functioned as a place of worship and study, and a community center. Some provided overnight rooms. Along with being the seat of religious faith, the synagogue became the gathering place, kind of like an English pub.

Imagine Jesus walks in with four friends and he starts to teach.

This stranger, Jesus, comes without the refined credentials of the scribe, a diploma to hang on the wall, or the equivalent of a PowerPoint to argue his interpretations. No one knows him or what to make of him.

² Rob Bell, "Real Magic with Nate Staniforth," *The Robcast* Feb 18, 2019 minute 22:00, <https://robbell.podbean.com/e/real-magic-with-nate-staniforth/>

He takes ancient scrolls, reads words they'd heard throughout their lives, only now with a new authority.

He doesn't teach like the scribes do.

How do they teach? We don't know. Perhaps their teaching is marked by sameness or dullness or resignation. Controlled. Predictable. Do they humble themselves in prayer before reading? Do they anticipate being startled by its authority?

Perhaps the people listen to them with the sense of having heard it all before. Whatever the case, it's clear that Jesus is different.

What distinguishes him is the authority he expresses. That word for authority could also be translated as power harkening back to the power of the holy spirit God sent into him at his baptism.

Jesus' teaching creates space for people to wonder rather than be confided by what is dictated to them with rules, laws, and commandments.

His authority also shines a light on the demons that possess one man.

In this explosive scene, an unnamed man with an unclean spirit speaks first. The possessed man speaks of himself in the first-person plural—“us”—only amplifying his cry: “What do you have to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?”

Then the man seems to recognize Jesus’ purpose of bringing God’s realm to earth. His demons know their ability to control him pales next to Jesus’ power to free him. They see him as “the Holy One of God.”

For this, Jesus censures and muzzles them. The “we” of this demonic host obeys, but not without convulsions and cries commensurate with such a corporate, embodied struggle.

Let’s not push aside this story as a primitive understanding of demons or some far-fetched fable without impact on us, today.

When I read stories such as this, I try to imagine casting it as a screenplay with some actor who brings to life this two-dimensional, nameless person.

In this case the man possessed by demons, rather than one person, is all of us. He is all of us possessed by not one demon, but all the demonic, life-threatening pressures that suck the life out of us such as loneliness, over work, or apathy. Maybe

someone's evil spirit gnaws at them with financial insecurity or bludgeons them with addiction.

This Epiphany story spotlights Jesus' authority with scripture and humanity. This story reveals the strength of God's word to us and Jesus saving grace.

Too frequently we watered down scripture's truth – the terrible exiles and the honest call for justice and mercy – to make it irrelevant.

Too frequently we live with lumpy rugs and ignore dead elephants by our fear of exposing the anxiety, depression, insecurities and all the other crushing feelings that keep us from being alive.

Too frequently we think of Jesus and the church as a social gathering or a community in which we need to don a persona of "I'm okay" when we silently cry for help.

Jesus does not bring some night-club routine with illusions or a sleight of hand. His ministry begins not with a trick, but by seeing and liberating one person at a time.

The crowd responds by being amazed.

Being amazed is the experience that proves things don't need to be as they are — that healing, transformation, and justice can happen here and now. Giving into astonishment means that there is more at work in the world than we usually see.

Yes, we see the nasty bits of life before we receive the surprises. When we're honest, we can name our own unclean spirit. When the light of Epiphany shines on the stinky bits in our lives; will we willingly let go and receive his help? Isn't that what we want, not magic, but the real magic, the kind that leaves us astounded and amazed? The kind that brings us to life.



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