



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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# Called to Steward

Dr. Jo Forrest



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This Epiphany season, we celebrate God's light shining upon us, beckoning us forward, to become what God intends for us as individuals and Westminster. We are working our way through four questions that when answered iteratively and individually show the way. As a review,

- We began with, "what is God calling us to be?" From the beginning, God has called people to be brave. We can expect nothing less.
- Last week we thought of how God's call unique in this community. Jonah's path reminds us, our uniqueness comes from God. Our lives shine when we give ourselves to God's purpose.
- Today we will consider how to steward God's gifts.
- The final question for next week will be what sustains.

We rely upon the common lectionary, praying God's holy spirit will breathe fresh insight to ancient truths, and turn again to the Gospel of Mark.

In quick succession, Mark tells the stories of Jesus' baptism, the calling of the first disciples, and now a third epiphany story launches Jesus' ministry.

Jesus called four disciples to leave their fishing nets with the simple command, "follow me."

Before I read where they went, please pray with me.

*Holy God, from whom we come, through whom we exist, and who is our ultimate destination, settle us now. Quiet the noise around so that your words will*

*astound us with your truth, drawing forward to follow your son, our savior. Amen.*

**Mark 1:21-28**

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.

They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

There was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit,

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.”

But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!”

And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

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.”

This is the word of the Lord,  
Thanks be to God.

Several years ago, I attended a week-long class for faith leaders at Northwestern University’s Kellogg Graduate School of Management.

Students from across the country descended into Chicago during a January polar vortex.

Our class embodied the perfect cliché with three Presbyterians, three rabbis, three Roman Catholic priests, and three Salvation Army officers. A stray Lutheran bishop, and Methodist deacon and a few other traditions rounded out our assortment.

Our distinct faiths, purposeful callings, and common difficulties in our respective congregations immediately created a sense of community.

Plus, the weather kept us hunkered inside. What started the first night after dinner continued throughout the week as we'd compose jokes of some collection of three of us walk into a bar, or different assortment walk into a comedy club, or each other's house of worship, and then fabricate all the ways we would startle those present and in the process ourselves.

After a bit, we all confided the potential to become immune to power of ministry. When sacred texts became so familiar, they would lose their authority for us, it impacts the congregation.

Each of us, at one time or another, had also experienced first-hand the ways a new person can startle a gathering. This is why guest preachers and a variety of voices enriches our faith.

When Mark tells us four fisherman and Jesus walk into a synagogue, you know the world begins to turn upside down.

*Typically*, scholarly authority rests with the scribes, and yet Mark claims Jesus taught with authority. He did not just read or speak, he taught with authority.

Mark neglects to tell us what Jesus taught, which means it was immaterial. To be taught implies that those who heard him connected with scripture in ways that opened their minds and their lives with what God intends.

Jesus took the same texts they'd read all along and infused it with life and divine power. Jesus astonished them.

*Typically*, a house of God would be the place for healing and yet, until Jesus walks in, the man with an unclean spirit lingered in despair.

Had anyone bothered to care for him? Or, had the gathering become accustomed to living with conditions that detract from the fullness of God for so long that they no longer noticed.

Did they not see the spirit crippling the man and their community? Or, had they lost interest in healing as well?

Think about how easily we live with something day in and day out, to the point we no longer perceive, or descend into accepting the way things are is the only way.

Another destructive tendency to this could be, how often do we hold on to our resources, doubting their impact when combined with others' gifts, starving the community and ourselves?

Jesus and four fishermen walk into a synagogue. Amidst the same old same old, they create a new way



for their community. Rather than apathy, sacred teachings astonish. Evil dismissed. Hope abounds.

Mark never attempts to describe Jesus. Mark only tells stories of how God relates to Jesus, what Jesus reveals about God and our potential to pulling us back to God.

In this epiphany story Jesus enters the pain and ugliness, without flinching, to engage with people as they are.

Mark demonstrates in this encounter along with myriad other healings, teachings, and conflicts with authorities, God seeks to be present in our messy lives to show us....we have all we need for life to flourish.

More often, we get in our own way.

When we see that the status quo or worse yet, the inhumane conditions we tolerate, are not what God intends, our faith in God is rekindled.

And when our faith in God and God's love for us is restored, our faith turns to hope. Hope becomes the fuel for us to enter the fray.

In the words of theologian Jurgen Moltmann,  
...whenever faith develops into hope, (it)  
causes not rest but unrest, not patience but  
impatience. Hope does not calm the unquiet  
heart, but is itself the unquiet heart in  
humans. Those who hope in Christ can no

longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it.<sup>1</sup>

We can only wonder how those four fishermen felt. Mark usually mocks the disciples as a bunch of clueless by-standers. Later in this gospel, some of Jesus' followers cannot sustain such conflict and leave.

But those who stick with him, witnessing him restore life over and over, begin to grasp his gifts. One of my favorite verses from Mark rises from a dialogue between Peter and Jesus, at such a blow-up when Jesus asks him, why he is still there. "Where can we go, you alone have the words to eternal life."

Upon Jesus' resurrection they carried on the task to be the disrupters, the hope-providers, the unquiet hearts, the ones to take what occupies our lives all the time, with ideas and people, and turn them into something beautiful, something closer to what God desires.

The past year of pandemic and the drumbeat of national ills drew too many of us to the habit of doomscrolling. That made-up word describes the habit of consuming too much negative news online and in social media.

One of the subscriptions T.V. services from Apple, launched a new series, *Ted Lasso*, as an antidote to the gloom. *Ted Lasso* earned praise from Brene Brown, a passionate devotee to the series, as well as other cultural commentators.

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<sup>1</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 21.

The series chronicles a folksy, thick-mustached Ted Lasso, played by the former *Saturday Night Live* cast member Jason Sudeikis, whose reputation in turning around faltering American football teams to become the coach of a losing English football club.

He arrives in England with a trusted assistant coach, named just “coach.” Immediately, Lasso displays his ignorance of soccer, barely understands the terminology, or any of the traditions in the United Kingdom.

His players, already discouraged by their losing streak, mock him to his face. The fans take to calling Lasso a word not appropriate to the pulpit.

Unbeknownst to him, the team’s new owner hired him with a hidden agenda. She won this team in the divorce settlement from her billionaire, ex-husband. Recalling this soccer team was the only thing he ever loved, she plots to run the team into the ground out of revenge with Lasso as a pawn.

You can imagine what happens. Lasso may not understand European football, but he understands people, what drives them to excel. He gets under their skin with his incessant desire to bring out the best in each of them and the team.

His star player, who is as Lasso claims “one in a million,” learns to check his ego in order to play as one of the eleven on the field.

The team’s gopher boy morphs from performing invisible, menial tasks to become the insightful motivator simply because Lasso remembers his name,

“Nathan” and treats him with respect. Who knew drawing the greatest down to earth and lifting someone from the bottom to be on the same level ground creates a winning combination?

Sports writer for the *Wall Street Journal*, Jason Gay writes, “Lasso greets each day with a sunbeam of hopefulness. Initially, Ted’s good cheer is presented as comical naiveté...Over time, we learn Ted’s no buffoon. He’s someone who thrives on being underestimated, has learned to parry negativity with bullishness...to believe things will get better.”<sup>2</sup>

I’ll not give away the season ending, but as they turn the corner from one miserable loss after another, finally becoming contenders, Lasso faces the greatest hurdle. Before a game with their archrival, the team and fans shrivel, repeating over and over again, “this is the hope that kills.”

Lasso won’t have anything to do with such notions. Hope never kills. He took bedraggled, players, unable to see their talent, to become something they always had the capacity to be.

That’s what hope actually does.

Hope never denies the how broken or bruised we might be. Hope is the restless, unquiet heart that turns us to believe in the future.

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<sup>2</sup> Jason Gay, “The Importance of Being Ted Lasso,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 15, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-importance-of-being-ted-lasso-11610723375>

Jesus calls us to hope beyond the storm and to hope in life even beyond the cross.

What would it be like for someone to take you by the hand, look at you with compassion, acknowledge the failures you've endured, and put hope back into your heart?

God gave you talent and resources. God alone gives you the gift of each day and tomorrow. How would it feel to again carry an unquiet heart that compels you to bring your best game forward?

This is the job of the church.

Those four fishermen long ago learned of Jesus' authority and took that hope into the world. They taught with astonishment. They drove out the evil that kept people captive. With divine imagination they stewarded the resources readily apparent.

We are called to be those bearers of hope.

To do so, we must steward the resources of our individual lives. Look within ourselves and ask if we are really bringing our best to God.

And then, we steward this church community by looking beyond all the failures of the past and invest in our future – a future that desperately needs the hope we offer.

Let your heart become unquiet, impatient with hope. It is a mighty, scary call, and the only way to live. May it be so my friends. May it be so.

*Speak with authority  
in our lives, Christ.*

*Speak to us,  
and to what is in us,  
so that we might be whole.*

*Speak to us,  
with love,  
with hope,  
and with strength,  
so that we might hear you,  
and know, deep inside,  
that we are your people,  
and that you are our God.  
Let it be so.*



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