

[SLIDE 1] Dwelling in Easter: Proclaiming the Death and Resurrection of Jesus

2 – Healing and Purification from “the Forces of Death”¹

Good morning. As we continue in our series “Dwelling in Easter,” the challenge we will continue to face is connecting the Easter Story in the Gospels with our story. This, really, is the challenge always with engaging the scriptures at any point of the church year and it is the enduring challenge faced with anyone that stands behind this pulpit to preach on any text. There is a special challenge, though, I think, with connecting the Easter story – a story with such dramatic, world transforming claims about Jesus’ death and resurrection - with our own today. What, we are asking, does the death and resurrection of Jesus have to do with us here, right now, today?² Last week when this worship series was introduced, we journeyed with the disciples on the road to Emmaus and found ourselves challenged to not rush to an answer to this question. We were challenged to take time to remain in the Easter Story long enough to have our hearts stirred as we look back on Jesus’ whole life leading up to the cross. On the Emmaus Road we learned that looking back on Jesus’ life after the events of his death and resurrection opens possibilities for new revelations of how Jesus’ saving ministry remains active in the present. Challenged to dwell in Easter, we wondered whether we might come to see the risen Jesus still forgiving sins, still healing, and still at work delivering us from the powers of evil and death? So, we come to the

¹ Throughout this sermon, I draw on the language of “forces of death” from Matthew Thiessen’s book *Jesus and the Forces of Death: The Gospels’ Portrayal of Ritual Impurity within First-Century Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2020). The language Thiessen employs, however, derives from Jacob Milgrom. Cf. *Jesus and the Forces of Death*, p.16 where Thiessen quotes Milgrom. Thiessen’s presentation of the Gospels’ portrayal of ritual impurity, it should be evident, has greatly influenced my thoughts in this sermon, especially pp.5-7 of this sermon.

² Although it might seem an odd use of parallel language at this point in the sermon, the wording here approximates the unclean spirit’s question to Jesus in Mark 1:24: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” In some ways, that is what we ask in every new age.

second Sunday in our series with this question still before us [SLIDE 2]: “how does the Easter story of Jesus’ death and resurrection continue to define our story today?”

For anyone in Canada this last week, of course, a big part of this country’s present-day *story* was the election of a Prime minister and political party that will govern us. [SLIDE 3] The story of the Canadian election was at the top of the headlines all last week and continues to be a dominant headline today. Many of us noted, I’m sure, how a feature of this election were the stark terms used to describe the stakes of the outcome. [SLIDE 4] Parties and news outlets described it as the most *consequential* election in Canadian history, as *crucial* in determining *the fate* of the country, and as markedly *different* than most elections of recent memory. The stakes in this election were “high” and indeed the expectations placed on the newly elected Canadian government are now high. People are looking for action to address very concrete concerns ranging from: national unity and sovereignty, economic security and affordability, climate justice, health care, crime, defense, housing, immigration, and the list goes on. The needs are many and some of the forces at play and barriers in the way seem insurmountable.

I couldn’t help but feel like the descriptions of this election in the headlines along with promises made by the different government parties for addressing the many needs of our world found some distinct parallels with our story from the Gospel of Mark, [SLIDE 5] even as the time and place it was written in was so long ago and even as some of the specific needs were quite different back then. After all, already in the first chapter of Mark’s Gospel we find declarations of the good news of change, the good news of Jesus the Messiah, the one who is coming at the right time in history to address the needs of the people through ushering in a new kingdom in his ministry – a kingdom defined by the life of the servant of God (called “Son”) who comes to heal the sick, cast out evil, and bind up the brokenhearted (Ps. 147:3). The word

ministry, we should remember, which continues to be used in modern political systems like ours in Canada, has its origin in the Greek word *diakonia* which is the word for servant. This is why today we talk of public ‘servants’ and ‘ministers’ in parliament.

The first chapter of Mark’s Gospel also features political campaigning in the wilderness with John the Baptist, and even a political slogan that Jesus speaks at one point: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news.” Mark describes Jesus the Messiah gathering his ministers around him telling them to follow him so that they can fish for people – to draw people into this new kingdom that is coming. Mark also describes the scandal of this political movement and the attempts by others to politically suppress it by arresting John the Baptist – an action that we know eventually leads to John’s death. And, it doesn’t take long before Mark launches us directly onto the campaign trail, where we witness Jesus going from place to place bringing the good news to the people.

In all of this description of Jesus as a political figure, though, I’ve left out a crucial and important element or rather, *a crucial campaign co-leader*, you might say, namely, **[SLIDE 6]** the Holy Spirit. Jesus the Messiah, Mark’s Gospel declares, is coming in the power of the Holy Spirit and indeed is himself called “the Holy One of God.” Jesus is a force of holiness that brings authority and power with him. In Canadian politics we talk about a “Prime minister” – in the Gospel of Mark’s political language, we have “the Holy One of God” whose “ministry” and service among the people is a transformative force, addressing the deepest needs of the people. As we find ourselves launched onto the campaign trail with Jesus, we find that his ministry is *not just talk* of promised changes but *the embodiment of those changes*. What were those changes? **[SLIDE 7]** Here is where we link back up with our specific theme for today, for among the various ways Jesus’ ministry in the Gospel of Mark might be described, it could perhaps be

summarized as in a very significant sense a mission of *healing and purification*. By the end of this sermon, I hope we will see how Jesus' mission or campaign of healing and purification in his life would be understood by his later followers to extend through and beyond his death as well, so that even in his death and resurrection Jesus was understood to be achieving healing and purification for God's people and indeed the whole cosmos.

Now, before we launch headlong onto the campaign trail with Jesus, it might be helpful to tarry a bit with the words "healing and purification" in order to see how they related to the needs of the people in Jesus' day. [SLIDE 8] "Healing" is a word and concept that is relatively familiar and perhaps even comfortable for many of us, even as we may have reservations or questions about what we should expect healing to look like in different situations. We all probably have ideas for what it might mean to be healed in a given circumstance: healed from various health diagnoses through the help of doctors or nurses or healed in circumstances of relational conflicts, to name a couple of examples. And so, when we encounter stories of Jesus healing people who find themselves experiencing various health impairments, while we might have questions, we nonetheless might have a general understanding of what that healing accomplished for that person.

I suspect that the word "purification," however, [SLIDE 9] might be one that we struggle a bit more to connect with. Here I'm going to ask your patience while we wrestle with this word and its use in various places in scripture. Often, we take for granted that we know what words or concepts in the Bible refer to, but sometimes we need to dig deeper to find out what's going on and challenge our assumptions before coming to conclusions. So, as we dig into the language of purity, impurity, and clean and unclean, I ask you stick with me because we will come back around to Jesus' ministry of purification and draw the connections. The use of the language of

purification (and words like it) has a long and diverse history in Jewish and Christian, not to mention other religious traditions. Often “purity” language in the Christian tradition all the way up to today has been connected to the idea of moral purity – are we acting in ways that we would call “pure” and “honorable?” If we are not, we might say that we are “unclean” and acting in ways that are “sinful.” Here we might often think of that famous Psalm of David that says: “Create in me a clean heart, O God.” (Ps. 51:10) It is also important to note that throughout Christian history this language of moral purity has been abused or so highly emphasized that it becomes a source of shaming individuals into conforming to certain standards or cultural norms. This abusive or shame-focused use of the language of purity is unhelpful at best and destructive at worst. In our Mennonite heritage we’ve struggled with destructive language around purity as well. Think of Menno Simons, for example, who despite being wise in many ways advocated for strict discipline in order to achieve a church “without spot or wrinkle,” an unrealistic goal if there ever was one. While understandings of moral purity are certainly found at various points in the Old and New Testaments and have their place, it is really important to understand as we read all of scripture and especially as we turn to the Gospel of Mark, that there were also other understandings of purity and ways of being “unclean” at work in Jesus’ time, and some of them did not link up at all with the concept of moral failure or sin.³

The primary example of other understandings to bring up here is the understanding of *ritual purity* or conversely the state of being *ritually unclean* in Jesus’ day. For the Israelites in the Old Testament, while there were numerous ways one might become ritually unclean, there were “three major sources of ritual impurity” and anyone who has read Leviticus lately might

³ Matthew Thiessen explains this well in *Jesus and the Forces of Death: The Gospels’ Portrayal of Ritual Impurity within First-Century Judaism*, 9-13.

remember what they are. No takers? 😊 The three sources are: “genital discharges of blood or semen, *lepra* from where we get our word leprosy, although apparently, they are not the same thing (we can talk about that in worship response if you like) and finally, a third source, corpses.⁴ [SLIDE 10] Bet you weren’t expecting those topics in a sermon today! Throughout the Bible, contact with these sources made one *ritually* unclean and unfit to enter sacred spaces but *not*, I emphasize, *sinful*. The status of a person’s ritual purity or uncleanness was, however, important to discern when approaching the tabernacle (in earlier ages) or later the temple because that uncleanness was not to come in contact with the holiness of the space where God was said to dwell. In the biblical worldview, bringing impurity into those spaces could result in the dangerous scenario of either God’s people being harmed or God’s presence fleeing from dwelling among the people. So, there was actually a protective function at the heart of the purity system.

Now, looking in particular at the 3 major sources of impurity we could ask, why were these particular sources of impurity significant for the people of God? [SLIDE 11] Scholars speculate, but one thought is that they all seem to relate in one way or another to the reality of human mortality – they expose us as creatures that live and die, as creatures that are exposed to the forces of death. God, conversely, is immortal, holiness itself, and without birth or death,⁵ and so the logic behind the ritual purity system of the time was not to bring these overt elements of human mortality into sacred space because of how they so radically clash with that space. Again, this might seem foreign or strange to us, but it is important to remember that we live in a very

⁴ Thiessen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death*, 15.

⁵ Thiessen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death*, 17.

different time and place today than the Israelites and later first century Jews who still worshipped at the temple and who saw the world in different ways than we do today.

To address the problem of ritual impurity and enable access to the holy space of the tabernacle or temple, the Israelites and later the Jews of Jesus' day had basic processes to make oneself ritually pure again. Recent commentators note that these processes were *not*, contrary to popular interpretations, exclusive, oppressive or overly burdensome for the Jewish people. A modern analogy here, imperfect and imprecise though it may be, is to have us consider practices of not gathering at church or elsewhere with others, especially those susceptible to illness, when we ourselves are experiencing symptoms of sickness. Most people in the throes of illness wouldn't think it oppressive or overly burdensome (especially in the age of zoom) to stay home until they are better. Granted, the reason we'd stay home would not be for concern about polluting the sacred space of the sanctuary itself but rather concern for spreading the illness to others. Nonetheless, I am trying to demonstrate how people in Jesus' day did not necessarily begrudge the ritual purity system but accepted it as a part of their common life. While it is something we don't relate to in terms of our worshipping life today, it was normal for Jews in Jesus' day.

The key learning from this brief foray into thinking about ritual purity is this: the distinction between ritual purity and ritual uncleanness was one way that people in Jesus' day continued to maintain the distinction between the Holiness and immortality of God and the mortality of human beings – a distinction that was reflected in the holiness of the temple space as separate from the space outside the temple. Where this all connects now back to Jesus and his ministry on the campaign trail is I hope now going to become clear! **[SLIDE 12]** In Jesus' day, the forces of death were understood as continuing to exert their influence on God's people, but

they were understood to do so in a manner that went beyond the regular occurrence of natural bodily functions and mortal limitations. The forces of death in Jesus' day were also understood to exert their influence in the spiritual realm through the influence of unclean spirits. I suspect this is yet another area where many of us struggle to know how to make sense of the Gospel text's presentation of demons and evil spirits. [SLIDE 13] There is no way around it, the Gospels, especially Mark, present Jesus on a mission of exorcism to purify and heal. While I think we rightly approach these stories today with significant caution to avoid too readily adopting the language of the demonic in relation to illnesses in our modern age, there can be no question that in Jesus' day it was assumed that unclean spirits plagued people and that this was keeping them from being able to participate in some of the worshipping life of the community, not to mention more generally preventing them from living lives of well-being.⁶

In the midst, then, of a world where the forces of death plagued people on a basic level of their mortality as well as on the level of spiritual oppression, hope for God's salvation from these unclean forces was high in Jesus' day. There were expectations that God would bring a transformation of the world where the forces and realities of death – those forces and realities that clashed with the holiness of God - would not exert the control over the world that they had up to that point. And so, when Jesus came on the scene announcing the kingdom of God come among the people – announcing the Good news – the expectation of the people was that any

⁶ The employment of the language of the demonic can so easily be manipulated to exert influence over or against someone. This is literally where we get the idea of "demonizing" others from – falsely claiming they are possessed to discredit them. I actually would not be entirely uncomfortable with the language the "demonic" if it was understood to be a category that extended to such manipulation, and not primarily to those who are deemed "out of their minds." Might those persons, groups, or social systems that are given over to cold, calculated manipulation and harm of others in the relational, economic, social realm be called possessed by an unclean spirit?

news that could be called “Good” would have to be news announcing how God would deal with the forces of death.

As Jesus hits the campaign trail, we find out right away that he is engaged in a battle with the forces of death that and that his ministry becomes one of healing and purification through his holy power. As Matthew Thiessen puts it in his book *Jesus and the Forces of Death*, [SLIDE 14]

The Jesus of the Gospels is the holy one of God, a man who embodies a contagious power or force that is opposed to and ultimately destroys the powers that create impurity and death.⁷

Jesus’ ministry, in other words, is a ministry of healing and purification. [SLIDE 15] Jesus’ ministry didn’t reject the Jewish ritual purity system, then, but arrived as God’s Messiah who would deal with the forces of death that necessitated the ritual purity system. In our passage from Mark 1 for this morning, we saw this on display in Jesus’ encounter with a man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue (Mk. 1:23-26). While Mark is sparing on the details, the emphasis in the passage falls on two main points: first, that Jesus is the Holy One of God and that this holiness threatens to destroy the oppressive spirits, and second, that indeed the unclean spirits obey Jesus’ command. Isn’t it remarkable that one of Jesus’ first acts on the campaign trail is to cast out an unclean spirit, thereby restoring this man to the possibility of a life of well-being?

This inaugural political act of Jesus’ is not an isolated incident, either. [SLIDE 16] As his ministry progresses, he is found making a leper clean, healing a paralytic man, healing a man with a withered hand, healing a man with an unclean spirit living among the tombs, healing a woman who had suffered from hemorrhages for years, raising Jairus’ twelve-year-old daughter, healing the Syrophoenician woman’s daughter, and the list goes on and on. Each of the encounters Jesus has with people impacted by the forces of death, be they physical or spiritual,

⁷ Thiessen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death*, 20.

are met with Jesus as God's agent of holy power to save from the forces of death. How remarkable, then, and perhaps even understandable, that later, when Jesus was hoisted up on a cross, people derided him saying "save yourself." With Jesus' death, it seemed as though his political campaign and the promise that it brought for healing and purification was shown to be ultimately a failure. Maybe miraculous for a time, but nothing that could address the long-term problem of death's dominion. **[SLIDE 17]**

And yet, with reports that Jesus was raised from the dead, his followers began to look at their reality in a whole new light. Jesus' campaign of healing and purification, they came to believe, did not fail because it led to his death, rather, Jesus' death was itself the climax of the clash between God and the forces of death – a climax that ultimately led to God's Holy power healing and purifying Jesus and through Jesus, all of reality was beginning to be healed and purified through power of the resurrection. And so, rather than Jesus' earliest followers looking back at his death as a moment of defeat, they saw in it the depth of God's love and God's Holy power – that God in Jesus would face the depths of death in order to usher in the defeat of death. **[SLIDE 18]** And in turn, his followers then saw it as their mission and their goal, not to have an easy escape route from the old world where the forces of death held sway, but rather to live into the new world of God's in-breaking kingdom that Jesus had brought in his ministry of life overcoming death. The church was to live into this world precisely by trusting in the saving ministry of Jesus whose life, death, and resurrection had charted a course forward by the power of the Holy Spirit. They were to carry on his mission of healing and purification in every new age, facing boldly in ever-new contexts the forces of death that attempt to drag God's good world down.

[SLIDE 19] Friends of Jesus, we might live in a very different age from those first Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus – our language concerning the forces of death might differ – our concepts of purity and impurity, our understanding of unclean spirits and the like might differ from theirs and our conceptions of what counts for purification and healing might have evolved since the first century. But if we look around at our world today, few of us can deny the need for healing and purification from the many forms of contamination and evil that run rampant in our world – from the forces of death that continue to hold sway. Few of us can deny that our individual, social, national, and ecological realities are in desperate need of God’s transformative healing and purification today too. And so, as we ask how the Easter story of Jesus’ death and resurrection continues to define our story today, might we begin by saying that it is does so as the Good News of healing and purification in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. The Good News that the Holy One of God, Jesus the Christ, has come to cast out from us and from our world that which binds us to death dealing forces, binding our hearts instead by the Holy Spirit to Jesus Christ and his saving ministry in living and dying for others, that all might experience life abundant. AMEN.