

Yes, God is Still at Work 2021
Psalm 111 Mark 1:21-28

Psalm 111 (New Revised Standard Version)

Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them. Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever. He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the Lord is gracious and merciful. He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant. He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations. The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy. They are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness. He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever.

Mark 1:21-28 (New Revised Standard Version)

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. Just then 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, throwing him into convulsions 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.' At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

I had a challenging conversation recently
with a very dear friend, a woman I admire greatly,
someone I know to have a deep and abiding faith,
but for whom age is catching up with her, **specifically dementia**,
which is **a painful and confusing process of progressive loss**.

Her family members are having to make some difficult decisions
concerning her future & a change in her living arrangements,
and she's not welcoming that intrusion into her independence ...
... as of course none of us would.

She is deeply troubled, frightened, confused and frustrated.
And feeling threatened and isolated, she pleaded with me,
"What should I do about this and how should I respond?"

In some situations, there are no good or simple-easy answers
and no matter what, it's going to be difficult and painful.
We may wonder why?, and where is God in all this?

I suggested to my friend, that she might try to remember
and think back to some of the more difficult events of her life,
or painful experiences and losses she'd endured over the years,
and the fact that **God brought her through them each and every time**.

I knew that she had a strong and vibrant faith, and said to her,
"**And through all of that**, all you have endured and experienced,
the Lord has always been faithful and has stayed with you.
And all of it, God has used for your growth & spiritual blessings,
and so you have made a positive difference in this world.

Think about all the good and wonderful that God has accomplished

in and through your life up to now... even when there was darkness...
... so do you think that God is going to stop loving you now,
or that Jesus would ever abandon you in your need? ...
... especially amid such a difficult and frightening circumstance?

No, of course not.

You know all this from your own experiences in life,
and the wonderful promises of God in Scripture, such as Psa 111,
Great are the works of the Lord, Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness
endures forever...the Lord is gracious and merciful... He has shown his people the power of his works.
Or Genesis 28:15 --

Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, ... for I will not leave you until I
have done what I have promised you.

The Lord is not going to stop providing for you or abandon you,
because that's not who the Lord our God is or what God does,
who has always been faithful and **will always be faithful**.

Yes, every Christian I know occasionally has down and weary times,
seasons of hurt, difficult days and long endless nights
when accumulated troubles seem piling on to defeat us.
At such times it's normal to feel a bit lost, defeated or confused.

When the pressures & troubles of this world threaten to overwhelm,
when we are struggling and life's pieces aren't fitting together,
for the Christian,
the answer is to abide in Christ & abide in God's love.

**To abide is to surrender to the presence and will of God,
claiming God's promises to always support & sustain us...**

...trusting God's goodness, power, mercy & authority that never ends
and that somehow even amid our wounds, losses & disappointments,
the Lord still manages to create hope and good and blessings,
and if we're paying attention continues to astonish and amaze.

Astonish and amaze if we're paying attention,
and that is how the public ministry of Jesus begins,
as it's described in the Gospel called Mark.

The major message and focus of the Gospel of Mark is to reveal
who Jesus really was and that he had authority and power
to teach and command, to accomplish the promises of God,
and that he was indeed the true Messiah, sent by God.

Mark's Gospel begins by explaining in the very first verse, (1:1)

"This is the Good News about Jesus Christ the Son of God",
and then as evidence, story by story, event by event,
the author will demonstrate, and gradually reveal
the unfolding mystery and truth of his identity,
along with what that means and why it's reliably true...
... specifically, the teaching & healing power & authority of Jesus.

In this passage, Jesus is teaching on the Sabbath in a synagogue.
Typically rabbis would read a Scripture text,
then cite the opinions of noted rabbis and tradition,
with their focus on explaining **the demands of the Law**.

Their interpretations tended to be harsh and judgmental
as they pursued a sense of holiness and separation
based on excluding those others deemed unworthy.

In contrast to the legalistic demands imposed by the scribes,
the life-example and teaching pattern and message of Jesus,
focused on God's love, grace, mercy and compassion
that seeks out the lost and that welcomes the outcast.

Now Mark doesn't tell us exactly what Jesus said that day,
but clearly it wasn't that usual rabbinic teaching, vs. 22
They were **astounded** at his teaching, for he taught them as one **having authority**, and not as the
scribes.

Perhaps like his pattern of teaching in **Matthew 5, (21-22, 31-32)**
"You have heard that it was said... But I say to you ...
" It was also said, ... But I say to you ...

The point is, Jesus wasn't bound by traditions taught by others
because his teaching and authority came directly from God ---
-- **authenticated by the power of his words to accomplish,**
verified and confirmed by the authority
of Jesus to drive out the unclean spirit...
... that's the connection.

After his teaching in the synagogue that day, vs. 23-27
... 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."

In the pre-science-based perspective of Mark's world and culture,
demons, were the common explanation for sickness and misfortune,
and the expected solution or healing,
was to drive-out unclean spirits by exorcism...
... which doesn't fit with how we perceive and understand the world.

But we do know what it is like to be possessed by a strong desire,
to be drawn and influenced toward wrong-doing and selfish-evil,
by an inner motivation, a destructive longing or drive.

**We understand our battle between our best and our selfish side.
We do experience desires that tug us away from the ways of God.**

The point is, Jesus came to seek & save the lost, hurt and unclean,
**God's love and grace are the bridge, the power and authority,
that brings cleansing, healing & hope as enacted in this story.**

We probably wouldn't describe the scene the way Mark does,
but we can recognize & apply this passage to our own lives.

This exorcism story represents a struggle for influence
between the unclean spirit and the teaching-authority of Jesus,
just as we struggle to be faithful and to do the right thing.

By gracious love and mercy God has made us each one his own,

but I wonder, what am I choosing to retain and hold back?,
and where am I limiting God's transforming power in my life?

**Part of growing deeper as a Christian is more and more of me
submitting to God's reign, letting God's grace guide me,
my attitudes & the values I live, & the things I do & say.**

As an example, it's to begin each day with a prayer,

"Lord, please help me notice your grace and presence this day,
in my life, in my circumstance and in the world around me."

And at end of the day,

"Lord, I thank you and praise you for all the places
where I've seen your Presence at work this day."

As Christians, we are in possession

of the greatest and most wonderful Good News of all time,

**God's gracious power to bless and transform our lives,
amid whatever situation or trial we encounter or face,
which sets us free to trust the Lord in confidence.**

There was a farmer along the North Atlantic seacoast trying to hire help.
It was a rugged land of cold, awful weather and fierce storms.

A tough and grizzled old man applied for the job,

and the farmer asked him, "Are you a good farmhand?"

The man replied, "Well, I can sleep when the wind blows."

Though puzzled by his response, the farmer hired him anyway.

One night the wind howled and a fierce storm was blowing ashore.

The farmer jumped out of bed, grabbed a lantern

and rushed into his hired hand's quarters, yelling,

"Get up, get up! A big storm is coming!

Tie everything down, we have to get ready."

The recently hired hand, obviously annoyed, woke up and growled,

"I told you, I can sleep when the wind blows."

and with that, he rolled over and went back to sleep.

The enraged farmer didn't have time to waste firing him then,
but needed rush out and try to prepare for the coming storm.

To his amazement, the haystacks had already been covered with tarps

the animals were all safe in the barn

and the doors and shutters had been all made tight and secure.

Everything was ready for the storm, and nothing left to do.

Only then did the farmer finally understand,

& now he too, could sleep, **even when the wind blows.**

We forget sometimes to whom we belong,

and just who this God is, who so completely loves and cares for us,

and upon whose steadfast faithfulness we can surely rely.

**We secure ourselves against & amid life's storms & crashing waves,
with our walk of faith and through our relationship with Christ,
as God's presence, promises and Spirit guides and sustains us.**

We forget sometimes to whom we belong,

and just who this God is, who so completely treasures us,

and upon whose steadfast faithfulness we can surely rely.

God has promised to never forget, reject or abandon us,
and that we are constantly – permanently protected & sustained
because his gracious love and power have no limits or end.

Martin Luther was asked, when on trial for his life in Leipzig,
"Where will you be, when church, state, princes and the people have all turn against you?"
Luther replied, "Why then as now, in the hands of Almighty God."

If we'd never had a problem, if we'd never gone through a storm,
we wouldn't know all that God can do and God's sure care for us.

It is when we respond to life's storms with trust, faith and hope
that we grow deeper, our spirits soar seeing God's power with us
and it's then & there we experience his Presence most fully,
drawing nearer and letting God's grace work in our lives.

When disaster strikes, during down times or emotional upheaval,
when things are just not going well, or having trouble coping,
we can by faith victoriously deal with all things in life,
gathered under the nurturing guardian wings of our God.

My final suggestion to my struggling and troubled friend
was to let her light shine brightly wherever she was placed,
trusting that God was with her according to his will & purpose

and to be a useful instrument & blessing of God's grace...

**... through her interactions with family, staff and other residents,
and her life, her words & deeds as carriers of grace & healing.**

As Jesus commands in *Matthew 5:16*

In that way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.