



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, JANUARY 31, 2021
ON THE OCCASION OF THE ANNUAL PARISH MEETING
DEUTERONOMY 18:15-20; PSALM 111; 1 CORINTHIANS 8:1-13; MARK 1:21-28

CHIASMS AND CRUCIBLE MOMENTS



Mark 1: 21-28

- 21 *Jesus and the disciples 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 silent, 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.*

What a difference a year makes, huh?! As part of my preparation for our Annual Parish Meeting today, I reflected on my notes for last year's meeting in late January. My remarks that day centered on my belief and abiding sense that the Spirit is moving among us at Saint Mark's, and inspiring us in fertile ways. The Annual Report bears witness to this in its manifold expressions of good ministry.

And while our world has changed in a litany of ways to which we all can give voice in this new year, that bedrock belief that we are a community enthused with the Holy Spirit remains central to any message I have to share with you this morning as your dean and rector. Which is to say that any report of positive developments in the face of pandemic challenges must be conditioned upon a trust that God is up to something here—with us and in us and through us, and for a purpose.

I will reflect more specifically on our common life in the Zoom session that follows this service, mentioning several points of particular joy and several persons who evoke gratitude for their efforts to ensure the community has thrived in these hard times. I hope you will join in that celebration in a bit, but in this moment let me say (with fervent conviction) that the Spirit is moving in this

community, and I trust that this means we are being called into something new in a post-pandemic world. And I'd like to use two metaphors to consider what that might mean. Chiasm and crucible.

First, chiasm, which is a literary tool that pairs sentences in stepwise fashion to create a trajectory to the sentences, a sense of movement. A chiasm, from the Greek letter Chi, or X, is a crossing. We find these chiasms in the Iliad and the Odyssey, Beowulf and Paradise Lost, and interestingly, in the Bible. These eight verses from Mark's gospel form a chiasm, and we've formatted the text in your service leaflet to demonstrate the movement in and through the crossing.

The first verse is paired with the last, verse 21 and 28, then 22 and 27 are paired, and so forth. There is movement here, a sense of immediacy (21 and 28), amazement (22 and 27), crying out (23 and 26), and engagement (24 and 25). The chiasm cracks the story open and invites us in—with a sense of urgency, amazement, crying out, and engagement. The crossing catalyzes change—in the man who is healed, but in Jesus too, and the people who are amazed at his teaching.

There is conversion here, and I wonder how we might look on the last year through the lens of a chiasm drawing on similar

movement—the initial urgency of closure last March, the amazing ways the fraying of our social fabric was revealed, the cries of lament, the pivot of courage to engage real change. It begs the question will we press on or backtrack?

That day in the synagogue was a moment of truth for Jesus—nothing was the same for him after that—his ministry was shaped by his cries for healing in the world, and by people’s amazement, and a sense of urgency that this was his moment, this was his identity. There was no putting the genie back in the bottle after this moment. It was a chiasm, a crossroads, and he kept going. It was a crucible moment for him and the world.

The second metaphor: crucible moment. We’ve heard that phrase used a lot this past year to describe our circumstances. I know I’ve used it a lot myself, applying it to our society, and the Church generally, and Saint Mark’s specifically. We are in the midst of a crucible moment.

I suspect you know the term—a crucible is a vessel used to heat metals at high temperatures to purify them, or to prompt conversion of properties that make them stronger. The root of the word is *crux*, Latin for cross. It intends a crossing over,

movement from one state of existence to another. Like chiasm...

Surely we can say the Church is in the midst of a crucible moment, being tried and tested, even purified perhaps, to become something new. There’s no putting the genie back in the bottle. When we reopen, things won’t return to what they were before. There is a sense of urgency to consider how we will be different, how we can prepare. Can we consider how this is our moment of conversion in which we claim our identity in new and refreshing ways? We cannot know how it will all turn out; we just have to trust that the Spirit is the fortifying source, the catalyst of that conversion.

I will say I am amazed at the challenges we’ve faced and the adaptive ways we have forged a church community when we cannot be physically together. I am gratified, too. And I trust the God is calling us into a crossing over into a new day, to be Church in new and vibrant ways. I am glad to be making this journey with you.

And lest I leave you with the idea that all of this is unfolding at a communal level only, let me invite you to consider the ways these metaphors are designed to work in our individual lives as well. I bid you reflect on the chiasm and crucible moment that is

presenting to you in this extraordinary time, as a disciple of Jesus Christ who invites you to make the journey with him, as a person of faith trusting the Spirit is moving in your life right now, as a citizen of this society which is crying out to be left alone, and yet deep down desperately wants to change, to be freed from its demons, and you must ask yourself: what is your part in that?

Urgency, amazement, crying out, and engagement. A crossing over into something new. A crucible moment.

Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to God from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen. Ephesians 3:20,21¹

¹ The image on title page is from [crucible moment - Bing images](#)



Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!