

# Lakewood Congregational Church

*A Congregation of the United Church of Christ*

Sunday, January 31, 2021



An Order of Worship to be followed in your home, along with our  
worship video on your own  
Preferably at 10:00am

## **Welcome and Announcements**

If you are new among us, welcome. Please know we are glad you're here; you're welcome in our remote community and you're welcome in our physical community when the time is right.

We will have an Annual Meeting at 11:00am, on Sunday, February 7, via Zoom.

At Lakewood Congregational Church, we strive to be people of extravagant welcome. Whether you are young or old, gay or straight, single or partnered, happy or sad, confused or inspired, street smart or college-educated, whether you can't pay your bills or you have more than enough to share—no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here in this place, to worship a loving God who welcomes us all. As I stand in this sanctuary I join my heart with you and I pray that you might feel the refuge of this space.

May the Peace of Christ be with you. Let us worship God.

## **Prelude**

*Voice of Truth* by Casting Crowns  
Chris Burns, voice and guitar

## **Call To Worship**

One: Friends in Christ, what hopes do you bring to worship?

**People:** We bring hope for health and wholeness.

One: What afflictions do you bring to worship?

Physical pain?

From illness and injury.

Emotional pain?

From sad and scary life situations.

Mental pain?

From disease of many kinds.

With all of these afflictions,

it's a miracle that any of us have made it to worship this morning! But where else would we be?

**People:** We yearn to know God's powerful love  
and to know that wholeness is possible.

One: In today's gospel, a person with an "unclean spirit"  
interrupts Jesus, and Jesus sets the person free.

And where does the miracle of this story and our stories  
begin?

**People:** When we bring all of who we are -Hopeful, afflicted,  
bold—into relationship with the Divine.

One: So come, let us create a sacred space with our whole  
selves-Hopeful, afflicted, bold-

**People:** Come, let us worship!

## **Hymn *O God, Our Help in Ages Past***

LCC Virtual Choir

Gwendolyn Delany and Victoria Peacock, sopranos; Gwendolyn  
DeLaney, alto; Steve Hotchkiss, Michael Komperda, tenors; Noah  
Hamrick, Peter Hampton, Tim Hampton, Robert Wenz, basses

*O God, our help in ages past,  
Our hope for years to come,  
Our shelter from the stormy blast,  
And our eternal home:*

*Beneath the shadow of thy throne,  
Thy saints have dwelt secure;  
Sufficient is thine arm alone,  
And our defense is sure.*

*Before the hills in order stood,  
Or earth received her frame,  
From everlasting thou art God,  
To endless years the same.*

*A thousand ages in thy sight  
Are like an evening gone;  
Short as the watch that ends the night  
Before the rising sun.*

*Time, like an ever-rolling stream,  
Bears all its sons away;  
They fly, forgotten, as a dream  
Dies at the opening day.*

*O God, our help in ages past,  
Our hope for years to come,  
Be thou our guide while troubles last,  
And our eternal home!*

## **Pastoral Prayer**

God of generation to generation, we are grateful that you summon this day into being, a new creation. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. We are grateful that you are near to us and that you invite us to bring the deepest joys and greatest concerns of our lives and share them with you. Hear us as we pray.

We pray for the earth, our home,  
and for people within it who need help;  
for people who are lost and need to be found.

We pray for those in the midst of war,  
for families separated from one another, for so many reasons,  
for people who have suffered immeasurable losses due to  
violence or disaster:

Especially those in Mozambique and Zimbabwe in the midst of  
yet another Cyclone.

We pray for children who are without families or homes or a  
safe place to learn  
and for people across the globe and in our own city who live in  
the midst  
of domestic violence or abuse.  
Lord, hear our prayer.

You are the God of the hungry, the God of the sick, the God of  
the prodigal.

We pray for people who are out of food or money— and for  
people who will spend the day in a hospital bed  
or who are sick outside of a hospital because they have no  
healthcare or there is no room.

We pray for our healthcare workers.

We pray for people whose hearts and spirits are broken.  
For the mentally ill, the anxious, the addict, the depressed;  
for families who are estranged.  
for the lost who need to be found,  
for the ones who believe they don't deserve forgiveness.

You are the God of the rainbow, the God of the cross, and the  
God of the grave that is empty.

Help us, in our unbelief,  
to believe in forgiveness,  
to believe in redemption,  
to believe your promise that nothing can separate us from you.  
Help us to see the belovedness in ourselves and all those we  
meet.

Bless us as we connect to one another in our homes.  
May we may be signs to each other of your grace and peace.  
We pray in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, who taught us to  
pray, Our Father . .

## **The Lord's Prayer**

**Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy Will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory forever. Amen.**

## **Invitation to the Offering**

When we give of ourselves to meet the needs of others, we are co-creators in the health of God's creation. As we have been given much, let us give in return.

## **Dedication Prayer**

Transforming God, we dedicate our gifts for the health of your creation. May those who receive these gifts be blessed by your love and inspired to give to others so that your creation will continue to be transformed by your love.

## **Doxology**

Praise God from whom all blessings flow.  
Praise God all creatures here below.  
Praise God above, ye heavenly hosts:  
Creator, Christ and Holy Ghost. Amen.

## **Scripture Reading, read by Thom Geist**

### **Mark 1:21-28**

#### **The Man with an Unclean Spirit**

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.

## **Message**

- I. This is a new book in our house (*Captain Snout and the Super Power Questions: Don't Let the ANTs Steal Your Happiness*). I'm not going to read it to you but I do want to tell you about it. It talks about a concept in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy called ANTS: Automatic Negative Thoughts. There are many different kinds of ANTS: The All or Nothing Ant, the Blaming Ant, the "Just the Bad" Ant. These ANTS happen to all of us, not just kids. These are the thoughts like, "This pandemic is never going to end." and "Nobody ever calls me anymore." and "All my friends forgot about me." So in the book, Captain Snout (he's an anteater) teaches kids how to kick the ANTS out of our minds. He teaches Superpower questions: "Is that true?" "Are you 100% sure it's true?"
  - A. But there are a lot of other things we can say to our ANTS: "You're not welcome here." "Actually this pandemic is going to end and there are many people working hard to make that happen as quickly as possible." "My sister just called me a few days ago, and my friends are all going through a hard time too; I have the power to pick up the phone and call people if I'm feeling lonely and forgotten."
- II. If we let ANTS drive us, we risk becoming lost to ourselves. There's actually an extraordinary amount of research out there about this, but basically we know it's true that when we "feed our ants," when we fuel the negativity in our brains, the part of our mind that senses fear and unhappiness grows stronger. Rather than listening to the truth of what's happening around us, we invite, instead, a lying voice to teach us how to live and behave. There are endless examples of this in movies in literature. I'm sure you can think of some.

- A. I've thought of The Lord of the Rings, the character of Gollum, and the way that the Ring held power over him. After centuries of influencing and manipulating him-- centuries of ANTS-- Gollum was in this constant pull between his lust for the Ring, and his desire to become free from it. The Ring had ownership over him.
  - B. If any of you are really into Lord of the Rings, I know I just wayyyy oversimplified that, but I'm thinking of this one line, when Frodo calls him by his real name, the name he had before the Ring took power over him: Smeagol, and it hurts him to hear it, and he spins into this kind of identity crisis and then says, "And we forgot the taste of bread... the sound of trees... the softness of the wind. We even forgot our own name."
  - C. My favorite example is in the movie Moana, when it's revealed the raging Lava Monster is in fact the beautiful island of Te Fiti, who had her heart stolen from her.
  - D. Moana sings to her, "I have crossed the horizon to find you/ I know your name/ They have stolen the heart from inside you/ But this does not define you/ This is not who you are/ You know who you are" When Moana calls to her, she remembers who she is.
  - E. Confession: I can't watch that scene without crying.
- III. This is such a common storyline because we all relate to it: the story of people who have become lost to themselves, who forget who they are-- for one reason or another, often because they listened too closely to the ANTS and allowed them to drive them into despair.
- A. And then someone or something intervenes, and reminds them who they are, and invites them to reclaim themselves... and reorients them towards

- their right sense of identity. So this is the story of Smeagol in the Lord of the Rings. It's the story of Te Fiti in Moana. And I'm here to tell you that it's the story of the man with the unclean spirit in Mark. Actually, this happens all the time in the Gospels.
- IV. This act in the synagogue in Capernaum is Jesus' first public act in the Gospel of Mark. Yes, last week he called his disciples on the beach, but that wasn't so public-- this week he stands right in the middle of the temple, on the sabbath, while everyone is listening to his teachings and amazed at who he is and what new ideas he is bringing forth into their world, and this man interjects who is loud and boisterous and apparently upset-- "what are you going to do to us? Are you going to destroy us?" He interrupts the teachings, and speaks with anger towards Jesus. And then he says, "I know who you are."
- A. We don't know quite who this man with the unclean Spirit is. Some say he may have represented the Scribes in the synagogue, who weren't used to what Jesus was saying. There's a sense throughout the Gospel of Mark, through Jesus' crucifixion, that there were those who did not want Jesus to upset the established order. Perhaps this man was among them: "Have you come to destroy us?" Is another way of saying, "Have you come to take away our comfortable normal?" He says, "I know who you are." I know people like you, people who want to take the power away from the wealthy and the elite and distribute it to those on the margins. "Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are."
- V. With directness and intention, Jesus responds to him-- "This is not who YOU are." He recognizes that it is not the man who is speaking these angry, boisterous interjections; it is the lifelong influence of greed, resistance to change, fear of discomfort, who is interrupting God's movement in

the Temple. So Jesus speaks directly to the one who has lost himself to those influences. He says, “Come out of him, unclean spirit. Let him be who God created him to be.”

A. And this is super dramatic: “the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him” -- it did not go gently or silently. A lifetime of Automatic Negative Thoughts does not often go silently. It didn’t go silently for Smeagol or Te Fiti either.

VI. This act sets the pace for the Gospel of Mark. It becomes a story of calling people back to who God created them to be, of seeking the insights of the marginalized, of deliverance and mercy, and profound connection.

VII. Biblical interpreters often refer to this as a passage about Demonic Possession, but let’s talk about what that means. The concept of Demon Possession has led to some pretty painful misunderstandings and treatments throughout history, especially around the topics of mental illness and developmental disabilities. But I don’t think we’re talking about literal Demons here. I think we’re talking about ANTS, about unhealthy thought patterns, about that which is interrupting us from recognizing God’s grace in our lives. It is those moments when we have forgotten who we are, and to whom we belong, when we’ve listened to the wrong voices. When we have given so much power to Greed. Grief. Resentment. Anger. Fear. Envy. Loneliness. That we have forgotten our own name.... That we have lost the power to know ourselves.

VIII. As we saw in the synagogue, Jesus will stop everything to turn to us and speak directly to the brokenness inside of us: “This is not who you are. Come out of my beloved one, unclean spirit. Let this person be who God has created them to be.”

IX. There’s a reason a story like this is so common in our movies and literature. There’s a reason Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is so widely used to make sure the ANTS don’t steal our happiness. There’s a reason this theme is present at such an early stage of Mark’s Gospel: because it is so intensely relatable. So many of us carry upon our shoulders and in our hearts burdens in our lives, ANTS in our minds, that are constantly preventing us from being who God created us to be.

A. This is the story of stress so heavy that we can’t laugh anymore.

B. This is the story of grief so powerful that we cannot love the people who are still with us.

C. This is the story of shame so suffocating that we can’t tell our loved ones our desires and longings.

D. This is the story of drowning in scarcity so that we cannot see the abundance right in front of us.

E. This is the story of self-medicating through addiction.

F. This is the story of fear so crippling that we cannot make the next step.

X. The world will have us forget who we are so easily. It doesn’t take long. We are always just one advertisement, one letdown, one argument, one insult, one exclusion away from losing our sense of self. So we must practice and remind ourselves day in and day out of this promise that God sees within us the purest versions of ourselves. We practice through scripture and prayer, remembering that the teachings of Jesus call those unclean spirits out of us: “He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” We need to be reminding ourselves and each other every day that we were created in the image of God, that God knit us in our mother’s wombs and loved us for we were fearfully and wonderfully made, that God created the earth and the sky and the sea and the people and looked

upon us and said that we were very good, that we were enough, that we were everything God ever dreamed of.

- XI. The Gospel of Mark reminds us that the unclean spirit will not go quietly. Brene Brown says, “Don’t walk through the world looking for evidence that you don’t belong, because you will always find it. Don’t walk through the world looking for evidence that you’re not enough because you’ll always find it. Our worth and our belonging are not negotiated with other people. We carry those inside of our hearts, and so for me, I know who I am, I’m clear about that. And I’m not going to negotiate that with you. I’ll negotiate a contract with you, I’ll negotiate a topic with you, but I’m not going to negotiate who I am because then I may fit in for you but I no longer belong to myself and that is a betrayal I’m not willing to do anymore.”
- XII. Brene Brown kept her quote secular but I think as Christians we could add to it: “Our worth and our belonging are not negotiated with other people because God already called us beloved.”
- XIII. So, Beloved. This pandemic is long and it can be lonely, but it is not forever, and you haven’t been forgotten. Tell those ANTS to go away, or turn to Jesus to help you cast them out. Remember your name. We need you here.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

\*\*\*We’ve included this transcript for the benefit of people who do not have audio access on their computer. Please keep in mind that it is written in a way it’s spoken, so the grammar/sentence structure may feel a bit awkward to read. Even so, this feels like the best way to communicate to as many people as possible.

## **Benediction**

And now in the wholeness and the goodness of God, go forth, even if you stay right where you are... In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One God, Mother of us all. Amen.

## **Postlude**

*My Faith Looks Up to Thee* by Terry Kirkland  
Ben Malkevitch, organ

## Offering and Contribution Collection

Please consider fulfilling your pledges during this time. Financial gifts are always welcome, and our church feels the call to respond to the needs around us as they arise. Financial stability allows us to do so more effectively. So, let us give generously of our time, talent, treasure to further the work of God in our community. You can do so in the following ways:

- Writing and mailing a check to Lakewood Congregational Church, 1375 W. Clifton Blvd., Lakewood, OH 44107
- Texting STEWARD to 44-321
- Sending a gift through your bank's online bill pay
- By using the donate button on the church's website [www.lcc-church.org](http://www.lcc-church.org)
- Call the church office at (216) 221-9555 to discuss other options

*Our Mission Statement proclaims our common goal.*

*We strive to be a welcoming,  
worshipping community of faith,  
helping people discover and deepen  
their relationship with God, growing as  
disciples of Christ, and reaching out in  
faith and loving service.*

*In keeping with the spirit of our Mission Statement,*

*Lakewood Congregational Church,  
United Church of Christ,*

*is an Open and Affirming congregation.*

*We welcome people of all sexual orientation,  
ages, differing abilities, and ethnic, economic,  
and racial backgrounds into*

*the full life and ministry of our church.*

*We declare this in the name of the Still Speaking God,  
whose Son, Jesus Christ, welcomed  
all people into God's circle of grace.*

