

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers

Sunday, January 25, 2026

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Beloved, grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. I'm grateful that you have tuned in this day to hear the reading and proclamation of God's word. Turns out that this is the second part of what we hope will only be a two-part sermon series, *Sermons from the Sofa*. I preached the first one back on February 6th of 2022 when an ice storm had befallen our city. Now, this morning, the snow and the sleet continue to fall outside and accumulate. So we have part two, and we hope it's the final part. And we hope that wherever you are this morning, you are safe and warm. We're going to gather around God's word this day and continue a more official sermon series that we are studying throughout the season of Epiphany. The series is guided by this question that Jesus asks of his disciples. *Who do you say I am?* And each week, we've been answering that question. And as we have, we're building this Christology, this understanding of who we know Christ to be as those who follow in his way. So this morning we answer the question that Jesus posed of his disciples by saying that Christ is *teacher and healer*. Christ is teacher and healer. Mark 1 is going to guide our study this day. But before we read from holy scripture, let's join our hearts in prayer. Let's start with a couple deep breaths. So, get comfy wherever you are, maybe on your sofa yourself. Close your eyes and take a couple deep breaths with me. Let's take a deep breath in.

Breathe it out slowly.

Another deep breath in. Breathe it out slowly.

Breathe in God's mercies. Breathe out God's mercies to others. Breathe in God's mercies and breathe out God's mercies to others.

Gracious spirit, you are as close to us as our very next breath. As the snow falls outside, we pray that your peace might fall fresh upon us this day, that you might quiet us by your power. You might quiet any voice within us but your own that we might hear your word for us this day. and that in hearing we might be called to lead lives of response. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

All right, friends. The Gospel according to Mark. We're in the first chapter. We're going to start in verse 21, go through 28, and then skip ahead to 32 to 34. Let us listen together for God's word to each of us and indeed to God's church this day.

*They went to Capernaum. And when the Sabbath day came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teachings. 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*

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*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 quiet and come out of him." And the unclean spirit, convulsing him, and crying with a loud voice, came out of the man. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching and 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. And that evening at sunset they brought to Jesus all who were sick or possessed by demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And Jesus cured many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons. And he would not permit the demons to speak because they knew who he was.*

Friends, the grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

It's important how stories begin. And it's instructive, too, how authors decide to begin stories. The author of the Gospel according to Mark wanted to be very clear and place these stories right at the beginning of Jesus's ministry. He goes down to Capernaum, goes into a synagogue and begins to teach on the Sabbath day. And people are amazed. They are enthralled by what he has to share with them. And we don't get the content of the teaching in this instance. We'll not learn that till later on in the Gospel, right? But what we do receive in this text is the response of the people. The way in which he teaches engages them in heart and soul and spirit, and they are amazed. Like any good teaching, it leads to them asking questions. And they'll do that in the text as well. "Who is this one? Teaching and with authority, healing and with authority." Jesus is placed in the synagogue by the gospel writer so that people will know from the very onset of this Gospel that Jesus is a great teacher. But this teaching that he does, it not only arouses the...the attention of the people listening, but it also draws forth an evil spirit or one who is possessed by spirits. And that one comes forth and begins to ask questions of this teacher. "What have you to do with us? We know who you are. You are the holy one of God. Have you come to destroy us?" These teachings of Jesus draw to the surface the evils that surround the people in that time. This is important for us because, in confronting those evils, Jesus names them and then draws them out from the people and casts them away. That's what he does to the man who is possessed. And the Gospel writer places Jesus as teacher and healer right at the very beginning of the story so that everything else we read in the Gospel might be shaped by this understanding that Jesus the Christ is the one who communicates wisdom in teaching wisdom that that draws people in, that amazes people, but that he also communicates healing—the drawing out of diseases and demons. This is important because when the people see it, they start to bring all sorts of folks to Jesus. That's what verses 32 to 34 say. They see this one thing happen in the synagogue, then they go to a home. And the part we skipped over is there's a...there's a healing of a woman that takes place,

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and then they start bringing everybody with all of their diseases. And scripture says that he healed many, cast out many demons.

As we're building a Christology together, we cannot do so well and rightly and faithfully without understanding that in Christ, God communicates wisdom and healing in a unique and authoritative way. This is critically important for us. It was important for the people who were reading and hearing the Gospel for the first time many years ago, and it's important for us now. The Gospel writer wants to communicate that Christ's way, Christ's way embodies wisdom, and Christ's way leads to healing. Now there's dimensions of this. There were dimensions of this...this wisdom that was communicated to the people through the Gospel then and now. And as we've done a couple times over the last several months, I want to explore the dimensions of this wisdom of the Gospel writer in at least two ways. First, the personal and then the communal. There's this personal dimension of Jesus as teacher and healer that the Gospel writer wanted the people to pay attention to. "This is one from whom you can draw wisdom on how to live and move through the world on how to be faithful to God. Pay attention to the way that this Jesus moves through the world," and the people will do that. For the remainder of this gospel people will follow him. He gains acclaim here through healing. But people continue to be enthralled with his teachings. And he doesn't just teach at a lectern. He teaches by how he lives, the people he sits down at table with, the people he challenges in the public square. Everything he does is a communication of teaching in some way. This is really important because not only for the people then but for us now in a time when we are in need of deep and abiding and timeless wisdom. Come back to that in just a second.

There's also this personal dimension of the healing part. This Christology of Christ as healer. There's a personal dimension to that as well, because those who see him cast out the demon in the synagogue and those who witness him heal the woman in her home and then see all these people with dis-eases and demons come forward and him cast them out and heal them, they are not only witness to that being done in other people, but what they get to see is the potential for that to be done within them as well—that any dis-ease they carry with them, any voice that dwells within them that brings division and chaos can be cast out by the one who they know in Jesus. This is important for them. It's incredibly important for us as well now. On Wednesday evening, our Session gathered. For those who are newer to Idlewild, our Session is our leadership body. It's a group of elders and pastors who help to govern the church. And every time we gather for an in-person meeting, which happens every other month, we begin our meeting with fellowship and time around table. That's the first act of our meeting. Our second act is we worship together. And our final act is what some people might refer to as the regular business of the church. But we believe that all three of these acts are the business of the church and particularly of church

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leaders. Well, in our worship time, that second act of our meeting, we read this text together, and I asked the elders an important question, gave them a little slip of paper and a pen, and I asked them to reflect on Jesus as teacher and healer. I gave them a couple prompts. I asked them to think about the places in their lives in need of the wisdom of Christ. And what I imagine happened is in the silence of that reflection, they thought about all the places where they are struggling to know the right decision or the right path forward. They're struggling to find the right words. They're struggling to have deep and abiding wisdom as they move through the world. I asked them to reflect on where it was in their lives that they needed the wisdom of Christ and to write that down on that little sheet of white paper. Beyond that, I asked them a second question. Asked them to think about where in their lives they need the healing of Christ to take place. Because it's important for us to trust and believe that we still worship one who heals every dis-ease, casts out every demon. This is important for us to know because the Gospel is meant to be deeply personal in nature. And so for you this morning, I wonder if you might reflect on the same questions personally. Where in your life are you in need of the deep and abiding eternal wisdom of Christ to break in? What decisions are you struggling with? What paths are you worrying about walking down? Not knowing the right way to go. Where do you need wisdom that is divine in nature beyond you? I wonder if you might make some notes this morning for yourself.

Beyond that, I'll ask the second question as well. Where in your life do you need healing? What dis-ease are you having to navigate? What voice is speaking incredibly loudly and destructively in your heart and in your soul this day? I ask you that because there's no purpose in building a Christology that doesn't have a deeply personal dimension. Not private. Not private, but deeply personal. Christology is only impactful to us, who we say Christ to be, if we truly believe that who we say Christ to be in the world is also true within us as well. If we say Christ is teacher and healer, then boy, we better be open to the wisdom that he has to communicate to us. If we say he is the healer, then we better be open to that healing as well.

And in the same way that our Christology must be deeply personal, it also must be deeply communal. It is only valuable in so much as we understand that the things that we believe about Christ have an impact in our community and in the world. So we need Christ to be indeed personally our teacher and our healer. But we also need to trust and believe that the wisdom of Christ, that the healing power of Christ is at work in the world as well. We need to know, especially in this time, that the wisdom of Christ still has abiding power. That Christ can still heal every dis-ease. Christ can still calm every chaotic voice. It's important for us now because as we awoke to more snow and sleep this morning, we also awoke to the news of yet another person killed by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents in Minneapolis. Only a few weeks after

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grieving the death of fellow Presbyterian Renee Good, we wake to the news and the video of the death of Alex Pretti. And we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that dis-ease and that brokenness persist in our world. That the work of love and justice remains unfinished. And so we look to Christ for wisdom and healing for our world. That's what those who follow in the way of Christ are supposed to do—to trust that our Christology has an impact in the wider world.

I was blessed this week to be back in Decatur, Georgia, for a meeting of the board of Columbia Theological Seminary. I was blessed to get to hear the teaching of a wonderful professor, the Reverend Dr. Jeffery Tribble. He brought devotion to the board meeting on Friday morning. And there was something that he spoke of that really captured my attention. He was quoting at various times Martin Luther King Jr. and Senator Raphael Warnock, who is also the preacher at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. And Professor Tribble spoke of something called the Unfinished Symphony. Maybe y'all are familiar with this. Franz Schubert's Unfinished Symphony. Most symphonies have four movements. This particular one that is famous or even infamous only has two. King used to use it and Warnock now uses it as a way to relate to the work of justice and love in the world. Work begun in Christ but yet unfinished. Work begun in Christ that is now our work to own as those who follow in the way of Christ, to continue the work of love and justice. King understood his ministry as doing that, continuing the unfinished work of love and justice in the world. Warnock, as well, speaking of the noble life. Warnock says “the noble life is a life engaged in work that is yet unfinished.” I believe that our life's project ought to be larger even than our lifetime. If it's not, then we're not dreaming big enough. We enter into and join in the unfinished work of Christ in the world. And we trust and we know that we will yet leave it unfinished. But we worship a God who is continuing the work and will indeed bring it to completion. This is incredibly important for us because as Christians, our understanding of Christ, our Christology, makes us claim that the work begun in Christ is our continuing work to do. That we are called to recommit ourselves to wisdom and to healing in the world. To trust that indeed the Christ that is made known in Jesus is indeed still at work within us these days bringing about wisdom and healing if we would pay attention.

I told you how I asked our Session to reflect on some important personal questions of where they need wisdom, where they needed healing. I was floored this week as I read a statement from another Session, the Session of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis. Their Christology became so clear. Their trusting in the wisdom and the healing power of God became so clear in the statement that they made in response to Renee Good's death. I commend it to you. You can find it on their website at the very top. Westminster Presbyterian Church, Minneapolis. I want to draw to your attention one particular part, and I think it can be instructive for us this day as we wrestle with how Christ's teaching and wisdom and healing power are still at work within

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us, how the church is to claim that in this time. They say this in their statement. “Rather than turn against one another, we turn toward community and proclaim God's love for all. We refuse to submit to the false power of chaos and terror. We refuse to hate, to retreat, or to be divided. Rather than giving in to the forces seeking to undermine our sacred connections, we believe Jesus's example of loving all people must guide our journey together.”

As I read that this week, all I could say upon completion was, "May it be so."

As we continue to develop this Christology, this deeper understanding of who we know Christ to be in our lives and in the world, I pray that we too might refuse to turn against one another. That instead we might turn toward community and proclaim God's love for all. That we might refuse to submit to false power, to chaos and terror, however loud the voice sounds in the synagogue. That we might refuse to hate, to retreat, to be divided, but rather...rather than giving in to the forces seeking to undermine our sacred connection in Christ, the connection that touches every bit of creation and every person in the world, that we might believe that Jesus's example of loving all people must guide our journey together.

Friends, I don't know the ways in which you are in need of wisdom this day or the ways in which you are in need of healing, but I trust and believe that Christ does and is attentive to you. And it is not difficult for us to look out into the world and see the ways in which we are in need of deeper wisdom and, indeed, of healing. I want to invite you to trust with me this day that Christ is also at work bringing wisdom and healing in our communities. That, indeed, we as a church are called to join in the unfinished work. So that together we might more rightly and faithfully answer the question that Jesus posed of his disciples, “Who do you say I am?” That we might together with one voice say, "You are our teacher and our healer and not just ours, you are the teacher and the healer of the whole world."

May it be so for us this day. Amen.

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