Since 1982 the [Bulwer Lytton Fiction contest](https://www.bulwer-lytton.com/) has challenged participants to write an atrocious opening sentence for what is imagined to be the worst novel ever written.

The competition honors Sir Edward George Bulwer-Lytton whose 1830 novel *Paul Clifford* begins with the infamous “It was a dark and stormy night.” Bulwer-Lytton did not invent this hopelessly cliched opening, which had been around for years,” and [continues to be employed](https://lithub.com/the-secret-history-of-your-favorite-bad-writing-cliche-it-was-a-dark-and-stormy-night/) over the decades by writers from Edgar Allan Poe, to Dumas’ *The Three Musketeers* to the legendary author Snoopy of Charlie Brown fame.

Mark, who invented the literary genre we know as the gospel, never sought entry into the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction contest and happily could not compete with the dreadful opening of 2023 Champion Maya Pasic, who wrote:

*She was a beautiful woman; more specifically she was the kind of beautiful who had an hourlong skincare routine that made her look either ethereal or like a glazed donut, depending on how attracted to her you were.*

I laughed about that for days.

Mark is not given to purple prose and his gospel opens without any “dark and stormy night” flourish, but instead with the declarative: “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God.”

This is immediately followed by a no-nonsense pivot to prophets ancient and modern: Isaiah and the Baptist.

Then his opening chapter picks up speed: Jesus gets baptized is driven into the desert and tempted and then calls his first disciples: all in less than a dozen verses.

Today’s gospel begins not even half-way into that first chapter describing the first public action of Jesus’ ministry. Sure he has undergone baptism, been tempted in the desert and had some intimate encounters with a handful of new recruits, but this is the first time we see Jesus as a public minister.

And how does Mark choose to reveal this new Rabbi? With a dramatic healing? the handing down of a new law of love? Raising someone from the dead?

Nope: the theologically frank – even brusque – Mark cuts right to the chase: Jesus’ first public ministry event in this gospel, which is Jesus’ first public ministry event in all of the gospels, since this is the original one, is an exorcism – who’d have thunk it.

Beginnings are significant. Scientific research has demonstrated that the initial questions you decide to pursue will deeply influence any answer you are hoping to acquire.

Elite athletes, like those that run past OSP each Chicago marathon understand that pacing themselves from the start is critical to running their best race.

Evidence suggests that preachers only have about 3 sentences to either engage or lose the majority of their listeners – I say this in all honesty to the 7 of you still listening – and writers know the opening of a novel or poem has the power to engage or repel and hopefully plant pivotal clues for the work’s unfolding.

J.K. Rowling knows that well. Go back and read chapter 1 of book 1: *The Sorcerer’s Stone*. The title of that first chapter “The boy who lived,” in four words summarizes the outcome of all 7 volumes.

So even if you have not read the 1 million plus word corpus or seen the movies, you don’t have to worry about Harry dying: his future and ultimate victory over Voldemort is announced upfront in chapter one.

Sorry if I ruined the ending for you; blame it on J.K. Rowling.

So here’s the spoiler alert for Mark’s Gospel — the gospel that is center stage in our worship for the next 11 months and which does not start out with Matthew’s gracious beatitudes nor Luke’s liberating themes from the prophet Isaiah but only a whirlwind Mark could do: Jesus’ ministry launch begins with a public confrontation with evil, announcing that God’s in-breaking reign stands in opposition to every satanic force, and repels every malevolent power that threatens the dignity of each child of God.

There are a lot of things that either the seminary didn’t teach or that I didn’t learn.

I didn’t learn how to craft a budget or how to communicate across genders or how to minister in the midst of polarization and prejudice. Those would have been useful learnings.

I also never learned how to perform an exorcism. Maybe that’s because just when I would have been eligible to receive the order of exorcist – yep, there was one – Pope Paul VI eliminated it in 1972.

For previous centuries, before one was ordained a priest, they were ordained to the office of exorcist in which they received the power to lay hands upon the possessed and cast out unclean spirits.

While it might sound odd, I had to learn about exorcism from others: not that anyone taught me to mimic scenes from the 1973 movie throwing holy water at a floating body and chanting: “[The Power of Christ compels you](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lpyg94OzHK0).”

Instead, over the years, I have learned from bold and holy folk, mostly from laity and especially from women, how to confront evil and oppression.

In my first ministry at the University of St. Catherine then and now the country’s largest Catholic women’s college, I learned how to resist the implicit patriarchy of the church so embedded in the worship I led for those women every day.

In one of my first preaching gigs in this archdiocese, I was prophetically shocked when a woman staff member said to the pastor after a series of inappropriate remarks “I will not be talked to that way” as she stood and left.

And in one of my most humbling experiences, I was once privileged to accompany a young man when he confronted the cleric who abused him, coming face to face with the worst evil in his life and in his own quiet way announced “begone, Satan.”

That moment was the epitome of N.D. Wilson’s observation that sometimes standing against evil is more important than defeating it.

When I was a seminarian dreaming about ordination, I excitedly imagined celebrating my first Mass or presiding at the weddings of my younger siblings. However, I never dreamt of performing an exorcism, not even on my older brother.

Ironically, however, I ended up performing many of them since they are part of the rite of infant baptism. Some clergy skip this section of the rite which can seem a little jarring, even problematic … suggesting that the most innocent of children are somehow possessed by evil.

As I try to explain, however, the innocent are born into a world where there is much wickedness where we teach each other prejudice, greed and hatred.

This rite of exorcism alerts the adults present not to be thoughtless agents of the malevolent, or unreflective models of sinfulness but rather to only and always nurture each and every child to become what baptism promises for them: to grow to be a temple of God’s glory.

The community of Old St. Pat’s is characterized in many ways: as a place of great inclusivity, of prophetic worship, of deep commitment to the social teaching of the Church.

In eucharist we continuously recall our shared baptism, the summons to be missionary disciples, to relentlessly take up the task of becoming the Body of Christ in the world.

I would wager, however, that you have never been invited to be a community of exorcists, not as portrayed in some Hollywood blockbuster or best-seller, but in the model of the Christ who not only faced down temptation in his own life – even the temptation of deep doubt at the time of his own Crucifixion – but who persistently stood up in very public ways to face down the evil of religious hypocrisy, the perversity of self-serving power and the self-righteousness of some who believe they have some inexplicable right to erase the lives of those whom they do not deem to be their equal.

Albert Einstein once commented that the world is a dangerous place not because people are evil but because of the people who don’t do anything about it.

The Jesus way is precisely to do something about it, which is deeply consequential as Jesus knew all too well.

Yet fed with God’s Word, and the very body and blood of Christ, we again commit ourselves as a community to protest the crimes against immigrants and innocent Palestinians, the starvation and neglect of too many children, the oppression of folk because of the color of their skin and the persecution of those who choose to identify with the LGBTQ+ community.

Aware of the dangers of doing so, but steeled in the example of Christ, with the [poet](https://paintedprayerbook.com/2012/01/24/epiphany-4-blessing-in-the-chaos/) we pray:

“To all that is chaotic in [us],
let there come silence.

Let there be a calming
of the clamoring,
a stilling of the voices that
have laid their claim on [us],

that have made their
home in [us],

that go with [us]
even to the holy places
but will not let [us] rest,
will not let [us]
hear [our] li[ves]
with wholeness
or feel the grace
that fashioned [us].

Let what distracts [us] cease.
Let what divides [us] [be gone].

Let there come an end
to what diminishes and demeans,
and let depart
all that keeps [us] in its cage.

Let there be an opening
into the quiet
that lies beneath the chaos,

where [we] find
the peace
[we] did not think possible
and see what shimmers
within the storm.”

Satan be gone, Baptized stand your ground, through Christ our Lord

Amen.