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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Epiphany 4, Series B
Saturday, January 30th, 2021
Sunday, January 31st, 2021

Sermon: Jesus: Mightier than Devils

Text: Mark 1:21-28

Focus: Christ came to destroy the power of the devil.

Function: That they would

Structure: Classification (?)

Locus: “God’s will is done when He breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature, which do not want us to hallow God’s name or let His kingdom come...” (SC, Third Petition of the Lord’s Prayer).

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen. Do you believe that demons exist? That may seem like a strange or off-putting question to you, akin to asking, “Do you believe in the existence of extraterrestrials?” Are Satan and the devils real, or are demons merely a metaphor for evil in our collective imaginations? According to research by the Barna Group, 40% of self-avowed Christians strongly agreed with the statement that Satan “is not a living being but is a symbol of evil.”¹ An additional 19% “agree somewhat” with that perspective. That means that three out of five American Christians don’t believe in the existence of the devil. And hell is pleased.

In the preface to his famous novel, *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis writes:

“There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.”²

¹ <https://www.barna.com/research/most-american-christians-do-not-believe-that-satan-or-the-holy-spirit-exist/>

² C.S. Lewis, “Preface,” *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), ix.

Lewis mentions two “equal and opposite errors” about evil spirits: obsessive interest in the occult and an outright denial of their existence.

Even to many Christians who *do* believe in the existence of demons, we may think that demonic attack or demon possession only happen in faraway lands where missionaries work with pagan tribes, or else that it only happened “a long time ago” in “Bible times.”³

But the Bible is quite clear that Satan and other demons *do*, in fact, exist, and pose a very real threat to us. St. Peter warns, “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8). St. Paul reminds us: “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). Take heed: the apostles, inspired by the Holy Spirit, would not warn us against unreal threats. Demons are real. Demon possession and “demonization,” a term coined by Dr. Ed Murphy, can and do occur in the modern world.⁴

We see a frightful picture of demon possession in today’s Gospel reading:

“And immediately 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’” (Mark 1:23-24).

Satan and his minions have four basic tactics in their war against the people of God: temptation, persecution, demonic attack, and demonic possession. All Christians struggle against temptation because the devil, the world, and our own “flesh” (our sinful nature) all seek to draw us into sinful thoughts, attitudes, words, and actions (1 John 2:16). Satan is called, among other ignominious titles, “the tempter” (Matt. 4:3). In this world, it is impossible to avoid

³ LCMS pastor Robert Bennett, a former missionary to Madagascar, has written two books about demon possession published by Concordia Publishing House.

⁴ Ed Murphy, *The Handbook for Spiritual Warfare: Revised and Updated* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992, 2003).

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every temptation. Jesus says, “Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come!” (Luke 17:1). Yet even if temptation is unavoidable, God promises that we will not be tempted beyond our ability, and with every temptation he provides the way of escape (1 Cor. 10:31). God gives us his Word and prayer to fight back against the devil (Ps. 119:11; Matt. 26:41), and Scripture promises: “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (Jas. 4:7b).

Yet if the devil cannot seduce us and weaken our consciences through temptation to sin, then he will often resort to outright persecution of the Church. In the Book of Revelation, Satan is pictured as a blasphemous beast, representing the political power of the world, that makes war upon the saints (Revelation 13). He is also called a dragon that tries to kill the Christ child and the woman clothed with the sun, who represents the Church. Every persecution is a demonic attack to scatter the Church and instill fear that causes people to fall away from faith. But God promises, “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev. 2:10). “Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus” (Rev. 14:12).

As if that were not enough, the devil can also attack and assault our physical and mental well-being—or what we might call “demonic *oppression*.” In the Book of Job, Satan destroyed Job’s business and sent a great wind to kill all ten of his children when the roof collapsed upon them (Job 1). When that was not enough to destroy Job’s faith in God, Satan afflicted him with painful, oozing sores, from which we could find no relief (Job 2). Satan then attacked Job through his wife, tempting him to “curse God and die” (Job 2:9), a great blaspheme that could have resulted in eternal damnation. Yet Job did not give in to the devil and kept his faith in God through all his terrible suffering and torment. Satan caused all kinds of physical pain, marital

strife, grief, and financial distress in Job's life. Yet Job kept the faith. "In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong" (Job 1:22; cf. 2:10).

Anybody who loves and serves God has a big target on their backs. The devil already has the world, so he focuses on taking down Christians: especially pastors and other church leaders. Just like he did to Job, Satan will afflict us with trials and tribulations in order to tempt us to turn aside from our mission, give up the faith, or fall into gross error or sin. So pray for us! Pray for me, my family, Miss Kristin—and all our church's servants, including the Council and Elders. The devil does not want the Church to succeed.

The final and most extreme form of demonic attack is demon *possession*, by which a demon, devil, evil spirit, or unclean spirit, takes control over somebody's physical body, sometimes including their speech and thoughts. (That is the case of the unfortunate person in our Gospel reading today.) The Gospel writers report demons that caused super-human strength, blindness, loss of speech, self-mutilation, seizures, paralysis, and even attempted suicide (e.g., Matt. 9:32; 12:22; 17:15; Mark 5:1-5; Luke 13:11).

You may notice where some of these symptoms could also be evident in various mental illnesses or neurological disorders. The Lutheran Church Fathers identified several diagnostic factors to help determine demon possession in a person.⁵ Yet even the old Lutherans cautioned against superstition: "Let the various signs of corporeal [bodily] possession be carefully examined, some of which are peculiar to the possessed, and some are common also to melancholy, ecstatic, and phrenetic: and so they are to be taken and considered, not separately but conjointly; lest we consider those afflicted with various diseases as possessed persons."⁶

⁵ See, for example, Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 5th ed., trans. Charles A. Hay, (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1876), 237.

⁶ Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology*, 237.

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As Christians, we must acknowledge that demon possession exists and may be a possible, underlying cause of various addictions, diseases, or mental illnesses. Yet we must not sensationalize demon possession or turn exorcism into a spectacle (what Lewis calls “excessive and unhealthy interest”). It would be wrong to imagine devils lurking behind every door. And we should be very careful before we declare that somebody is possessed by evil spirits. It can do great emotional and spiritual harm to somebody struggling with depression or schizophrenia to wrongfully call them possessed. Yet to ignore this spiritual dimension may be just as dangerous. It would also be foolish for us to deny their possibility.

The Good News in our Gospel reading is that Jesus has authority over the devils. He has the power both to silence and to drive out demons, as demonstrated today:

“But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, ‘What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him” (Mark 1:25-27, ESV).⁷

Notice the tremendous power and authority that Jesus has over the evil spirits. His Word alone is enough to command them and cleanse the hapless man before him. There are many other Gospel accounts of Jesus driving out demons. And though they may rage, foam at the mouth, or writhe in painful protest, ultimately, they must obey Christ and depart their hosts without killing them. That is the power of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our Savior and Lord.

The Good News is that Jesus has power and authority over the evil spirits. In fact, the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). Jesus overcame every temptation of the devil *for us* (Luke 4:13). He has been “tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15b). Jesus has literally “been there”; he just hasn’t “done that.” Jesus did

⁷ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

not even succumb to the last and deadliest temptation of all: to come down from the cross.

Instead, he stayed there until his dying breath, praying and bleeding for our forgiveness (Luke 23:34). At the cross, Jesus defeated sin, death, and the power of the devil, because he lived a perfect life, died as the only perfect sacrifice, and rose again to new life on the third day. The devil ain't got nothin' on Jesus! The devil may be a dragon, but he is a chained dragon (Rev. 20:1-3). Or, as Luther puts it, God has the devil on a leash!

The Bible even says that the demons are subject to us in Jesus' name (Luke 10:17). Elsewhere in Scripture, especially the Book of Acts, we are given the example of the apostles, who drove out demons in the powerful, wonderful, beautiful name of Jesus Christ: "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!" (Acts 16:18). And out it came! God has given his Church the power to bind and drive out demons in the name of Jesus. "Nevertheless," Jesus says, "do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20).

Do you know that our hymnal's liturgy for the Lutheran Baptismal rite includes a "mini" exorcism? Before the baptismal candidate goes under the water, he or she is asked three questions: "Do you renounce the devil?", "Do you renounce all his works?", and "Do you renounce all his ways?" To which, the baptismal candidate (or their parents) replies, "Yes, I renounce them."⁸ Thus, Baptism is often the first time in our lives when evil spirits are driven out and replaced by the *Holy* Spirit.

Christ came to destroy the works of the devil. He binds and silences demons and drives them back to the pit of hell. He brings freedom and forgiveness to all who believe in his name—and release from bondage to sin and the devil. The people of Capernaum marveled as Jesus'

⁸ *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 270.

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authority and power. I marvel that we do not. Yet Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords— and he has authority even over the devil, the usurper and self-proclaimed “prince” of this world (Eph. 2:2). But the devil is defeated. Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ shall come again. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ~~+~~ the Holy Spirit. Amen.