

Epworth Chapel on the Green
February 1, 2015
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Psalm 111
I Corinthians 8:1-13
Mark 1:21-28

Growing up as a kid, I had a grandfather who loved a good fight. When my brother Rod joined the Golden Gloves program in our town and started Boxing, my grandfather was front row center every time my brother stepped into the ring.

I remember the classic duals between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier. Grandpa was always pumped for those bouts, and I think he wagered a fair bit on them too. He loved a good fight so much, that I never understood why he did not learn to love Hockey!

I think that Mark may have been a person who also loved a good fight. Because in his version of the Gospel story, the very first thing that Mark records as Jesus begins his public ministry is a *fight*. A confrontation. A show-down – right smack in the middle of church, no doubt!

Last week we noted that for Mark, the world is under the control of hostile powers, evil forces. The world is bound by the Strong Man, and a stronger man is needed in order to free the world from his grip. And here – in his customary “cut to the chase” sort of way – Mark brings the clash of these rival powers front and center.

The text says that Jesus and his followers are in Capernaum, where each Sabbath day Jesus is teaching the people. A relatively unknown person like Jesus would have been permitted to teach because to this point, synagogue worship consisted primarily of Scripture readings and prayers, with commentary on the readings by lay persons who were literate and could read and write. In most cases, the persons who could read and write were the scribes, who became the authoritative sources for the Law's application not because they were scholars, but because they could *read* the sacred texts.

As Jesus is teaching, a man with an evil spirit confronts him. Actually, it is the evil spirit that initiates the encounter. The spirit says, "Why are you bothering *us*, Jesus of Nazareth?" Notice the plural there? One gets the impression that what is happening here is part of an ongoing battle, not a battle with an isolated demon. Jesus has come to do battle against the entire realm of evil.

Something else is also going on here. In Mark's Gospel, ordinary sick individuals call Jesus names like "teacher," or "Son of David", or "Master," or "lord" (small L). In contrast, demons address Jesus as "the Holy One of God," or "The Son of God," or "The Son of the Most High God." This would suggest to us that what this man suffers from is not what we moderns would diagnose today as some sort of psychological malady. And in fact, in Mark's Gospel Mark always distinguishes between those who are sick or have a disease or fever and those who

are possessed. For Mark, it is a demonic spirit, a representative of the Evil One, who is at work in this confrontation. And by naming Jesus this demonic spirit attempts to gain control over Jesus. He recognizes Jesus as a supernatural figure who has invaded his turf, and he knows that the battle is “on.”

We might not initially think so, but this confrontation that occurred in the Capernaum synagogue is similar to battles that we face in our lives in 2015. We are constantly doing battle with forces that try to rob us of true life. We are attacked by things that seek to keep us from being all that God has created us to be.

Indeed we might say in 2015 that there are many things that “possess” us: anger, fear, workaholism, Affluenza (materialism), substance abuse, on and on and on the list could go. Fill in the blank based on your own personal experience.

And if we are to take our cue from Mark (who reminds us that we must look behind what is going on in order to *discern what is truly going on*), then we should understand clearly the true source of our struggles. The true opponent in these battles we fight is not flesh and blood, but *spiritual* forces *behind* the names and the faces and the places.

At the risk of sounding naïve and politically incorrect, perhaps it is time for the church to once again name the struggle for what it is – *spiritual warfare*. Evil is a real presence in this world, and it incarnates itself in ways similar to ways in which good has become incarnate in Jesus.

When you struggle against sin, or when you are tempted to lie or cheat or steal or to gossip; when you struggle to respond to someone who has injured you with love instead of with anger and hatred; when you push back against compulsive or addictive behaviors, you are not just struggling with lying or cheating or gossiping, or with bitterness or anger or hatred – you are doing battle with spiritual forces of wickedness in high places. This world is a battle ground, not a playground. Every inch of ground is being contested.

There is a phrase in our liturgy that we repeat almost every week. It is brief enough that you may not even recall it or be aware of it. But it is there. It is found in our prayer of confession before we come to the Table. And the line says this: *We have experienced the power of sin and the Evil One.*

Those words are not space fillers. They are not liturgical ornamentation. They acknowledge that behind many of our struggles stands the one Martin Luther referred to as the “Prince of Darkness.” But Mark writes his Gospel, and tells this story, to announce that this Prince now stands defeated. The strong man has been bound by a man from a no-count town called Nazareth – a man who is the Son of God.

Jesus speaks to this evil spirit and silences him. He does not want to be confessed by the powers of darkness. There are no incantations, no appeals to

deity, nothing like that. He just issues a simple, effective command. He takes control of the situation, and exerts his authority over it.

Jesus' authority confounds those who are present, because it is true authority. That is, his authority is not like that of the scribes, whose authority was "derived" from their study and learning. Jesus' authority was like that of a prophet who has the Word of God directly revealed to him. (Cf. Deuteronomy 18:15ff; Jesus is the prophet of whom Moses spoke.)

It is that same authority on which we call as we seek to be the Body of Christ, and as we seek to help one another escape the hold that oppressive forces sometimes have over us. Our liturgy says it this way: *We have experienced the power of sin and the evil one, but even more we acknowledge your grace to forgive all sin and to enable and empower your people to be freed in this life from the bondage of sin and death.*

What are we saying when we pray those words? We are affirming not merely the reality of supernatural evil, but also the reality that Jesus Christ has vanquished that evil, with the result that we can be free and empowered to live as God desires us to live.

One final note. This story, and others like it, should be seen in the wider context of Jesus' ministry of teaching and preaching. In this story, the spirit

interrupts Jesus and attacks him precisely as he is engaged in teaching. Jesus is then forced to respond.

But Mark shows little interest in demons except when the discussion involves them preventing persons from living a full life. Mark does not seek esoteric knowledge about the existence of evil in this world. Mark simply offers saving knowledge to those who need healing and help.

As we come to the Table this morning, come with faith. Come with faith that no matter who or what confronts you in your life, the strong man has been bound and decisively defeated. Receive the grace he offers you. Rest in his peace that transcends understanding. Then rise up and give him glory and praise.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.