

Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church
Brillion, WI

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
January 25 and 29, 2012

Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him." News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

Comic book story lines aren't normal destinations for people in search of truth. We might catch the occasional Superman flick or another version of X-men 'cause it's entertaining. Then we walk away and say to each other, "What did you think of the movie?" "Not bad. I like that part where..." You know how that goes. We give the movie our personal review and then the conversation usually morphs into something very different on the drive home.

If you take a second look at comic book story lines, here's what I find fascinating: they're America's version of mythology. They are the U.S.'s Zeus and Hermes and Aphrodite. They are attempts to wrestle with the human experience, somehow to make sense of it, and ultimately to find meaning in it. Seriously, they are. Think about it. They all have a similar plot line. People are troubled by some version of personal menacing evil. A superhuman needs to come and save them. For every Batman there's a Joker. For every Superman there's a Lex Luther. For every Spider Man there's a Green Goblin.

Why is that? I'll tell you. Every person – Christian and non-Christian alike – senses that humanity needs saving from evil. Isn't that true? The gaping chasm between Christians and non-Christians is that non-Christians don't know who or what the Savior is from the world's evil.

I bring all this up because we're beginning to lose the sense that we have an authentic, personal, powerful, evil enemy in the world and his name is Satan. That in turns erodes our sense of urgency to find a Savior to deliver us from him. Blame naturalism. Naturalism is the idea that if you can't measure it or see it or somehow scientifically evaluate it, then it doesn't exist or at the very least doesn't concern us. And it's dead wrong. Let me level with you. Life is no comic book. We need to understand the enemy, how he attacks us, and how the Savior saves us. That's what this part of the book of Mark is all about. It's helps us to **discover the Deliverer from demons.**

So it was a normal Sunday. That's what the average churchgoer in Capernaum thought... until they got to church. This new guy, Jesus, gets up to preach. Everybody there is thinking, "This guy is blowing me away. He's so confident about what he's saying. He's talking in a way I can actually understand. And he's touching on topics like sin and forgiveness in ways that I've never heard before. This guy is awesome." Then there's this incredible confrontation. Here's what happened, **"Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, 'What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!'" (v. 23-24)**

This was a real live, demon possession. It is a totally verified case. Some may say, "Ahh. This is just some psychiatric dissociative disorder or something like that. It's not actually demon possession. This guy belongs in the loony bin." And they'd be wrong. The Holy Spirit verifies the case by stating that he was possessed. Think of what that means. This guy's mental faculties and personality (whoever he was) were subordinated to the control of a devil. His human spirit was relegated to some small space inside his own body. Doesn't that sound awful? This guy was an honest to goodness prisoner in his own body.

That brings us to the first thing we want to learn from this story. Devils are real. There is a famous play where a German guy named Goethe pictures Satan very full of himself saying, "I have disguised myself so well over time that now I'm only a fable to people." English speakers have stolen the line now. Maybe you've heard it somewhere – and in some ways it really is true: the greatest trick the devil has played on the world is convincing us that he doesn't exist. Devils are real.

Here's the other part of the equation. Not only are devils real, they're also powerful. I'm going to read a quote for you from Paul. While I'm reading try to figure out who or what Paul is talking about, **"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Eph. 6:12)** I went to Forbes website to find out who they think are the most powerful people in the world. Here's what it said: #1 Barack Obama #2 Vladimir Putin #3 Hu Jintao #4 Angela Merkel. Not surprisingly they list the most powerful politicians of the U.S., Russia, China, and Germany. But those people are not the real rulers of this world. In some cases, they are pawns in a worldwide offensive that they are unaware of. The powers Paul brings to our attention are Satan, and his evil minions.

So devils are real and they are powerful. So what? Why should we care? You may even be thinking, "I've never seen a demon possessed person and I doubt I will. Demon possession doesn't happen today." You may be right. A lot of what some might call demon possession today really falls into the realm of mental illness. And that makes sense. Think of it from Satan's perspective. If you're putting together a plan of attack when are you going to pull out all the stops? When are you going to allow your troops to make themselves totally obvious as a statement to the world

and to God? You do it when God is making his strongest play – when his Son is walking the face of the earth. The best defense is the best offense sometimes, right? That’s likely why in Jesus’ day there were very obvious demon attacks by possession. Today the devil seems to be using more guerrilla type tactics to get at people.

So we’re out of the woods because we may not need to worry so much about possession, right? We wish. We may not be in danger of demon possession, but we are in immediate danger of being tempted.

Let’s make an observation about how the devil works from this story. Jesus had been preaching – I’m sure an amazing, jaw on the floor sermon. **“Immediately a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out... “ (v. 23)** Did you see the demon’s trigger? It didn’t happen at a lecture on cardiovascular health. It didn’t happen at the local Kwik Trip or at some ancient supermarket. It happened at church. Yes, as surprising as that may seem, it happened at church. It was Jesus’ sermon that immediately triggered the reaction by the demon. I’m going to say it again for emphasis. God’s Word triggered the evil spirit to react.

Devils work on Christians in lots of ways. Let me tell you how they often do it at church. Time for me to confess. This is a ridiculous story, but it’s true. On Monday of this week Pastor Henzi and I were in Sturgeon Bay for a Pastors’ Conference. We always have a worship service to start off our conferences. So I’m sitting there in church listening to this sermon on Galatians. And then, no joke, all of sudden I found myself staring at my wedding ring like I’d never seen the thing after seven years of wearing it. I never think about it. Never. Why would I then? I’ll tell you why. It’s because God’s Word is a trigger for the devil. He didn’t want me to hear it. He stole it from me – at least for a little while – and I let him.

I’ve noticed along Highway 10 that hawks – I couldn’t tell you what kind – sit on top of the poles that hold up the power lines. I’m assuming they sit there and watch for a moment to swoop down on some unsuspecting mouse. We need to understand that the devil comes to church too. He really does. He sits here in our pews watching like a bird of prey. Then when God’s Word starts pouring out of the pulpit and from the lectern it triggers him. He goes into predator mode. He’s looking to steal and, hopefully, to kill with a long slow death of spiritual starvation by distraction. Let me put it in another more dramatic way: daydreaming at church is a lot like texting while driving. Over the long haul it can have tragic consequences.

Scary when you think about it, isn’t it? It is to me too. Until you read the rest of the story. **“Be quiet!’ said Jesus sternly. ‘Come out of him!’ The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.” (v. 25-26)** We’re no match for the devil or his very masterly distractions. You just saw who is. Jesus is. He’s the divine human we need to save us. We don’t need to dream up some superhero to help us. We have a divine person who came. He is the solution. I think it’s fun sometimes to think about how much better the reality of our Savior is than

the ones people dream up. He doesn't need a spidey sense. He doesn't need a bat mobile. Look at how powerful he is. We've already talked about how a human spirit is no match for a demon. Now we learn that a demon is no match for Jesus. He makes it look easy. He speaks, and the demon had to respond – even though he really didn't want to. You heard what Mark said. The demon convulsed the person and came out with a shriek. That was the demon saying, "Jesus, I have to listen to you, but I hate it. And I'm going down fighting." Jesus' message kicks devils out of church.

There was a time when Jesus sent 72 of his disciples out preaching. They come back to him full of joy the Bible says. Guess what Jesus said to them. He said, "**I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.**" (Luke 10:18) So yes, it's true that Jesus' message triggers a predatory reaction from the devils. It is also true that the message kicks the devil out of heaven. The devil's power essentially is blown to smithereens by the gospel.

We're going to have a little fun right now at Trinity. What do you say we punch the devil in his metaphorical face, chain him up, and toss him outside our church. We can do that because we have Jesus' message. Are you in?

You're forgiven. Jesus loves you. No amount of distraction or daydreaming will be held against you. I want you to take a second and internalize that. You're forgiven. God loves you. Smile a little bit now because the Lord is smiling on you. The same guy that preached like nobody did before him and nobody did after; the same guy that drives out demons by uttering a few choice words from his mouth is the same God-man who saved you. Let that thought fill you with joy. You're a forgiven person. Jesus loves you. You know it. You watched him from manger to cross. You know he died. You watched him rise. That's how you know it. You're forgiven. Jesus loves you.

We have a very serious enemy and a very real Savior, who is a very clear winner. Did you see what just happened? The devil slunk out of this church. Jesus won. Amen.