

Sermon for January 28, 2024 – 4th Sunday after Epiphany

Mark 1:21-28 EHV

Theme: Find refuge in Jesus' powerful preaching:

- 1) Because Satan lurks where we least expect him.
- 2) Because only Jesus can free us from his grasp.

²¹*Then they went into Capernaum.*

On the next Sabbath day, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. ²²They were amazed at his teaching, because he was teaching them as one who has authority and not as the experts in the law. ²³Just then there was a man with an unclean spirit in their synagogue. It cried out, ²⁴“What do we have to do with you, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!”

²⁵*Jesus rebuked the spirit, saying, “Be quiet! Come out of him!”*

²⁶*The unclean spirit threw the man into convulsions, and after crying out with a loud voice, it came out of him. ²⁷Everyone was so amazed that they began to discuss this with each other. They said, “What is this? A new teaching with authority! He even commands the unclean spirits, and they obey him!” ²⁸News about him spread quickly through all the region of Galilee.*

I wish Satan and his allies would appear like giant, mighty dragons leading multi-million-ogre armies. Why? Then, people might take the threat he poses seriously.

Sadly, he's far more dangerous than an ogre army led by dragons. How so? Because he hides himself – doing his best to convince our Western society that he doesn't exist. Without our realizing it, his demons entice us from the shadows to his way of thinking: that we should be able to do whatever makes us happy and not be forced to follow God's rules. Yes, the devil has so infiltrated the world that his minions are hiding where we least expect them – doing their best to create ungodly obsessions in our hearts with the hope that we let them take possession of us.

Who can save us from such evil? Not us, that's for sure. Only Jesus, who has authority over all, can save us because He came to destroy the devil's work.¹

With the example of Jesus casting out a demon from a man in Capernaum as our guide, let us learn to **find refuge in Jesus' powerful preaching:** 1) Because Satan lurks where we least expect him. 2) Because only Jesus can free us from his grasp.

Part One: Because Satan lurks where we least expect him.

After gathering his early disciples from fishing on the Sea of Galilee, *they went into Capernaum.*

Jesus decided to make this city the base of his ministry instead of his hometown of Nazareth. Why? Not because Capernaum was especially holy or good. The city was far removed from Jerusalem, and many Gentiles lived there. Not only that, but there was also much spiritual confusion among

the Jews. Instead of pointing forward to the Messiah who would take away the sins of the world, the Rabbis seemed to preach about what you can do to better your status before God. There was no peace in what they preached, no divine authority. Jesus had compassion for the people of that city because they were like sheep without a Shepherd.ⁱⁱ

On the next Sabbath day, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. ²²They were amazed at his teaching, because he was teaching them as one who has authority and not as the experts in the law.

What was the overall theme of Jesus' preaching? This: *“The kingdom of God has come near! Repent, and believe in the gospel.”ⁱⁱⁱ* Instead of telling the people how to earn God's favour, he used God's law to show how desperately they needed a Saviour. He pointed the people to God's promises of forgiveness in the Old Testament that pointed forward to the coming Saviour. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's Old Testament promises: the Messiah who would die for the world's sins so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.^{iv}

More than that, when Jesus spoke, most people felt compelled to listen. Why? Because he was their great shepherd – the LORD himself – calling out to his lost sheep. And just as a lost lamb can recognize the voice of a former master, so they could recognize their gracious God's voice in what he taught because he was exactly who he claimed to be: the LORD's promised Messiah.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: Jesus' powerful, authoritative voice is still heard today – amazing those who listen. Where do we find it? Wherever God's Word is preached in its truth and purity. Yes, regardless of the person proclaiming it, whenever God's Word is truthfully shared to call people to repentance and faith in Jesus, we can be certain Christ is there working through that witness. We can also be confident that His Word will amaze and work spiritual wonders – just as it did when Jesus spoke it in Capernaum. How so? Because God's Word is being proclaimed, of which he promised: *my word that goes out from my mouth will not return to me empty. Rather, it will accomplish whatever I please, and it will succeed in the purpose for which I sent it.*^v

Remember how I said the devil is a hidden enemy lurking in the shadows? Well, the divine light of Jesus preaching revealed one of his demons in a place you'd least expect.

²³*Just then there was a man with an unclean spirit in their synagogue. It cried out, ²⁴“What do we have to do with you, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!”*

Was this man some crazy person who ran into the synagogue? Based on the text, I don't think so. Instead, I think he may have been a member of that congregation – someone who periodically came to synagogue but, sadly, never heard the Gospel preached to him. Somehow and in some way unknown to us, a demon got hold of the man. I don't think the people around him knew the man was possessed until the demon revealed himself at Jesus' preaching.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, take note: this happened in a synagogue – a place of worship. My point? Don't underestimate the devil's scheming. Though he and his demons do their best to hide

themselves, they are very real – taking every opportunity they can to entice and tempt you. They desire to possess and destroy you by leading you away from Christ.

But if the demons hide, how do we know where they are to avoid them? The answer to that question is found in what the demon said to Jesus in our text: “*What do we have to do with you, Jesus of Nazareth?*” The devil and his minions want nothing to do with the truth of God’s Word that points to Jesus. That is why they do their best to try to get us to sin against God as Satan did with Adam and Eve. And if that doesn’t work, they try to twist the Bible to mean something God never intended – like the devil did when he quoted Scripture to tempt Jesus to jump off the pinnacle of the temple. Demons are constantly trying to get us away from Jesus.

As a vicar, my supervising pastor once told me: “The devil is in the details.” How true the statement is! He starts off small – maybe using a post you read on social media, a verse in a song you heard on the radio, a comment someone made, or something else to get you to think about something that conflicts with God’s Word. You may brush it off at first – not thinking too much about it, but then he comes back again and again, little by little, corrupting your mind to try to create an obsession in you for something that isn’t right. His whole goal is to lead you away from Jesus and His Word. Once he has you obsessing over something, he will use feelings of guilt to make you despair or tempt you to be angry with God – looking for an opportunity for you to invite him in so he can possess you.

To be clear, there is a difference between a person being obsessed with a sin and being possessed by the devil. Demon possession is real and still happens. At the same time, it is pretty rare, and the devil doesn’t have to “possess” a person to lead him astray. Their enticing a person to become obsessed with sin or thinking that is contrary to Christ is just as dangerous and happens all the time. Yes, the devil and his minions are hiding in the details of our lives, trying their best to lead us away from Christ. Understand this, dear Christian, so you can be on your guard and find refuge in Jesus because only He can free us from Satan’s grasp.

Part Two: Because only Jesus can free us from Satan’s grasp.

And Jesus is more than willing to save you from Satan’s grasp, for, as the Bible says: *This is why the Son of God appeared: to destroy the works of the Devil.*^{vi} That also explains why the demon in the man exploded with fear at Jesus’ preaching of His Gospel.^{vii}

Therefore, out of great compassion for the demon-possessed man, ²⁵*Jesus rebuked the spirit, saying, “Be quiet! Come out of him!”* ²⁶*The unclean spirit threw the man into convulsions, and after crying out with a loud voice, it came out of him.* ²⁷*Everyone was so amazed that they began to discuss this with each other. They said, “What is this? A new teaching with authority! He even commands the unclean spirits, and they obey him!”*

All it takes is a Word from Jesus, and demons must flee. Sure, they will rage as they go – as demonstrated by the man’s cries and convulsions – but they can’t stay when Jesus commands them to go. They must flee. Take comfort in this truth: the Jesus we follow has authority over all the devils and demons that harass us in life. He casts them away by the power of His Word.

“Ok,” someone might say, “I understand how Jesus freed the man from Satan’s grasp back then, but how does he do it today? I mean, Jesus is not here to tell demons: Get out!” Actually, Jesus is here, as He promised his disciples: *“In fact where two or three have gathered together in my name, there I am among them.”*^{viii} and, *“Surely I am with you always until the end of the age.”*^{ix}

Jesus promises to be wherever his Word is witnessed in its truth and purity. He is with every Christian who shares His Gospel with others – sending His Spirit with His Word to work wonders. So, how does Jesus rescue souls caught in Satan’s grasp today? Through the prayers of Christians and their confession of His Word.

WELS pastor E. Allen Sorum wrote a book about demon possession entitled, “2000 Demons: No Match for My Savior.” In it, he mentioned an anonymous brother WELS pastor who leads a group of Christians to confront demon possession. The “exorcisms” they perform are not like in the movies, with all these fancy rites and commands for Satan to come out. Instead, they spend time around the possessed – praying and witnessing the Gospel of Christ crucified – letting Jesus cast the demon out by the power of his Word. While they do this, the demon often rages – sometimes speaking about the secret sins of those in the prayer group to derail them from calling on Jesus in prayer. Yes, the demon rages, but over time he flees. Why? Because Jesus is present, keeping his promise to work through our witness of his powerful word to destroy the devil’s work.

And what Jesus accomplished through that group’s prayers and witness, he also accomplishes through you. No, I don’t know of any of you who have ever encountered a demon-possessed person, but every day, we all meet people still living under Satan’s influence. Not only that, but the devil tempts and entices us too. So, what can we do? We pray, repenting of our sins and trusting in Jesus’ mercy to forgive us. Yes, we pray - asking the LORD to open our eyes to the truth so that we avoid evil and live under his grace. And, assured by the Gospel that the LORD does forgive us for Jesus’ sake, we can pray for others – that Jesus cast the demons out of their lives that are tempting and enslaving them to Satan’s lies and false beliefs. And then, we witness the truth in love: both pointing to God’s law to expose Satan’s lies and, more importantly, bringing them to their Saviour Jesus, who died on the cross to pay for their sins in full to free them from the devil’s domain so they can live with him forever in heaven.

Yes, not only does Jesus want us to find refuge in His powerful preaching, but he also wants us to share it with others. Why? Because the devil lurks where people least expect him and because Jesus wants to free them from Satan’s grasp. May the LORD help us by keeping us in His Gospel grace – rejoicing in his forgiving love and, in the peace of his forgiveness, living in obedience to his commands. Amen.

ⁱ Cf. 1 John 3:8

ⁱⁱ Cf. Numbers 27:15-17 & Mark 6:34

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark 1:15 EHV

^{iv} Cf. Luke 4:16-21, John 3:1-21, and John 6:28-59 for examples of Jesus’ Gospel preaching.

^v Isaiah 55:11 EHV

^{vi} 1 John 3:8 EHV

^{vii} Cf. James 2:19

viii Matthew 18:20 EHV

ix Matthew 28:20 EHV