



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
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A Stephen Ministry Congregation
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Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

February 3, 2019

“Are You Stronger than You Think?””

(Luke 4:31-44)

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**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: Almighty God, You know we live in the midst of so many dangers that in our frailty we cannot stand upright. Grant strength and protection to support us in all dangers and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Every morning at about 5:15 or so my phone dings. It's a text from my cousin, usually a a passage from Scripture or some inspirational phrase. She's keeping a promise she made at the cemetery. It's a little ministry she does for a number of people who are contending with grief or illness or some other challenge.

The biblical passages are always good and helpful. Can't go wrong there! The other inspirational phrases, not so much. Now I don't want any of you tracking my cousin down and telling her I'm an ingrate. I really do appreciate her texts, most of them. But here's the one from Wednesday: "You are much stronger than you think." I thought to myself, "Hmm. I don't think Scripture would ever say that." I know the idea is we have more inner strength than we realize and can tap into that reserve if the circumstances warrant. But I also know Scripture isn't interested in that. The consistent message of Scripture is, in fact, the opposite: you're not as strong as you think you are. Remember, you're a lamb. You're vulnerable. You're not particularly fast or strong or smart. You're not a predator, you're prey, and you do have predators out there stalking you. They are strong, fast and fearsome, more crafty and cunning than you too. Most of the time you're not even aware they're out there and would have been picked off long ago were it not for your Shepherd, Jesus.

James 4, "What is your life. You are a mist that appears for a little time and then disappears" (v.14). The overwhelming message of Scripture, and specifically our Gospel lesson, is, "You're not as strong as you think you are, but you do have Jesus, and he is stronger than anything that threatens you."

Our Gospel lesson comes near the beginning of Luke and at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It serves to introduce Luke's readers to Jesus and is composed of three episodes.

We start first in the synagogue of Capernaum. Imagine you're there, in the synagogue and there's a visiting rabbi. You know nothing of him, but his preaching is captivating. Somehow, he preaches the old truths in brand new ways. It's as if he's been looking over your shoulder all week long. And he preaches with authority.

Suddenly, all that is interrupted when a man starts shouting at Jesus. It's loud and startling; there's something dark and sinister in his words. "Ha!" he says. "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" Who's he talking about? Who's the "us?" And it's strange: it's as if the mouth saying the words is no longer controlled by the man who owns the mouth; something else has taken over. Chills run down your spine. You've heard of demon possession but you've never seen it before, and there's nothing about this man that looks odd. He doesn't have little horns sprouting from his scalp and he's not dragging around a heavy, barbed tail. The mouth says to Jesus, "I know who you are – the Holy One of God!" He says it like an accusation.

Jesus firmly rebukes the mouth. "Be silent" he says. And then, "Come out of him." The man collapses to the floor, and when he gets back up he's healthy and of sound mind.

It's astonishing, but it all happened so fast you're struggling to piece it together. News of this takes flight. Nothing like this ever happened in Capernaum, so it's the talk of the town.

Next Jesus goes to the house of Simon Peter, who is married. His mother-in-law is living with them. She's suffering from a high fever, and someone asks Jesus if he could help her. He goes in, rebukes the fever, and immediately it leaves her. That's the second episode.

The third part of this text happens as that Sabbath day winds down. The sun is setting now, which means it's okay to work again. It's okay to bear burdens. So, out of their homes people come bearing their burdens. They limp and hobble their way to Peter's home. They bring with them

their sick ones, their elderly infirm. Some need to be carried. Some have no signs of illness outside, but inside everything hurts, and they don't know why. Some have rashes, some have knuckles gnarled by arthritis. Foot problems, knee problems, breathing problems. You name it; it's all there in little Capernaum. And they're all coming to see Jesus.

The text says he laid his hands on each of them and healed them. Nothing confuses him, no disease outwits him or resists him. Meanwhile, more demons are coming out of the woodwork. The mere presence of Jesus seems to rouse and agitate and expose them. He's the black light and they're glowing fluorescent. Curiously, they all seem to recognize Jesus. "You are the Son of God!" they shout. Again, it seems like an accusation, and I suppose from their perspective it is. But what they say is true; he is the Son of God. Jesus has no use for them and is not interested in what they have to say. He rebukes them and forbids them from speaking.

So, what ties these three episodes together? First, each reminds us the world is seriously broken. Demon possession, and all those illnesses . . . the world is not as it should be. Every living thing on this planet gets sick and eventually breaks down and dies. Arteries clog. Bone spurs distort the gait. Lungs rattle with mucus. Isaiah 51 says the earth itself will wear out like a garment. The world is seriously broken. It functions, but not like it was created to. Seems obvious but it's something we don't like to think about. Something we would even deny. So we say dumb things like, "you keep up with the oil changes, and that baby will run forever." No it won't. It'll wear out and break down just like everything else on this earth.

Everything's vulnerable, and we are vulnerable to everything, to the wear and tear of old age, vulnerable to temptations and rotten influences. We are vulnerable to polar vortexes, and the actions of bad governments. We are vulnerable to flu bugs, carbon monoxide poisoning and global warming. All three of these episodes say the same: You are not as strong as you think you are. You are

vulnerable.

All three of these episodes also say, “You are not as strong as you think you are, but you do have Jesus, and he is stronger than anything that threatens you.”

Did you notice there’s one word that appears in each of these episodes? That word is “rebuke.” Normally we don’t like that word because we’re the ones being rebuked... by the boss, spouse, parent or policeman. But in each of these episodes Jesus is doing the rebuking, and he’s not rebuking us; he’s rebuking our enemies. He rebuked the demon in the synagogue. He rebuked the fever suffered by Peter’s mother-in-law. And he rebuked the demons again later in the day. Jesus is stronger than them all.

With these episodes the Bible is telling us the earth is seriously broken and so are we. But Jesus is intent on making it right again. He’s not content with our brokenness or the earth’s brokenness, nor is he confused or frustrated by any of the maladies! He can rebuke whatever is wrong with us and nothing can resist his rebuke.

You know, there’s so much suffering, even now, within this sanctuary. If we were to compile a list of all the maladies of this group, it would be impressive, in length and scope! Jesus is stronger than anything on that list, and not content with it. Jesus has come and will ultimately rebuke our diseases and put down that serpent that beguiled our ancestors and introduced all this suffering. All these little miracles in Capernaum point to the same thing: Jesus has come to undo the curse of the Fall and reverse its effects. That happens on the cross, of course, where he died to forgive and redeem us; where he also defeated our enemies, those things that make us vulnerable: sin, death and the devil.

As in Capernaum, on the last day, all the demons and devils will be exposed, rounded up and rebuked, sent where they do not want to go, where they can no longer threaten or pester us. On the last day he will also create a new heaven and a new earth and give us new bodies that won’t succumb to wear and tear. On the last day, “he will wipe every tear

from our eyes, and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev. 21:4). The old order of brokenness and vulnerability will be no more.

Wednesday’s phone text said, “You are much stronger than you think you are.” No, I’m not. Don’t tell my cousin I said this, but that’s bilge water coming out of the side of the ship. The truth is we are weak and vulnerable, but we do have Jesus, and he is strong to save. Thanks be to God. Amen.

