



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

January 28, 2018

“What Makes Hell Shriek”

(Mark 1:23-27)

Rev. David K. Groth

“‘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.’” (Mark 1:23-27).

**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**

At the time Capernaum was a quiet town of about 1500. It was a fishing village, long and narrow, hugging the northern shores of the Sea of Galilee. One synagogue, (the one mentioned in our text) served the whole town. Archaeologists have long known where it is and have carefully excavated the site. They know it was made of white, hewn stone, brought in from a distant quarry and of superior quality to the brittle, porous stones that made up the rest of the town. They know those thick, white stone walls reflected the blazing heat of the sun, and so it offered cool respite on hot days. They know this synagogue was built to last, and did last. When Jesus walked into it, it was already about two hundred years old. They know it was rebuilt again in the fourth century and was finally abandoned around the time of the crusades in the 11th century.

In Jesus' day, it was the custom of synagogue leaders to invite visiting rabbis to teach or expound on a passage from the Torah. Jesus was invited to do just that. Now there was a way you were supposed to do that, namely by citing precedent and quoting other authorities. A teacher would make a point about the Torah and then document how other rabbis and scribes handled the text. He would quote well-known authoritative figures, not unlike a lawyer today cites previous trials. But Jesus didn't teach this way. He didn't quote other authorities. No, he taught as one having the authority. He spoke with the finality of the voice of God. "You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you . . ." And his words rung true. To those in Capernaum, it was like a breath of fresh air. Mark says simply, "They were astonished at his teaching."

In the middle of it, suddenly a man starts shouting at Jesus. It was all so loud and startling and inappropriate.

Sacred space is shattered. And, there's something strange and dark in what the man says. "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" It's as if the mouth saying the words is no longer controlled by the man who owns the mouth; something else or someone else has taken over. It's frightening. "I know who you are" the mouth says, "the Holy One of God!"

There's nothing about this man that really looks odd. He doesn't have little horns sprouting from his scalp nor is he dragging around a barbed tail. Yet Mark says the man has an unclean spirit, what we would call a demon.

What does Jesus do? What would you do? The text says Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit saying one firm word, "Quiet!" And then, "Come out of him!"

At the time if someone was thought to have an unclean spirit, the family would scrape together a sizeable amount of money and hire a professional exorcist. There would be a series of impressive incantations and spells and rituals and a few other fancy flourishes, but none of it was of much help. It made the family feel a little better, and there's something to be said for that; at least they could tell themselves later they tried everything. But again, nothing much helped. With Jesus, it's different. One simple word does the job. When Jesus says, "Quiet!" a demon simply must acquiesce. He has no other choice. He cannot resist it. And when Jesus says, "Come out of him!" he cannot say no. So, the evil spirit shook the man violently and came out with a shriek.

But backing up a bit, did you notice this bizarre character already knew who Jesus was? In the Gospels, the demon-possessed were among the first to figure it out. "I know who you are" he says, "the Holy One of God!" The disciples would need a whole lot more time and evidence before they were ready to say that. Thomas wouldn't really come around until after the resurrection. But this guy had it right, and he had it right from the very beginning. "I know who you are." Hell understands.

You recall at his birth, the heavens bore witness to him with the angels. Now hell is also bearing witness to him with demons. And it's curious, wherever Jesus goes now, his very presence seems to excite and expose those who are demon possessed.

Of course, those inside the synagogue are astonished. Nothing like this had ever happened in Capernaum. And it all happened so fast that they were left struggling to figure out what it means. That's where we are today. We've heard the account of the miracle, but what does it mean?

The miracles always have something to teach us, and this one certainly does as well. It tells us something about the power of his authoritative word which quiets storms and raises the dead and creates light and faith and chases away the devil.

It also tells us Jesus is stronger than the devil himself. We've known that so long that it seems silly to even mention it. But we wouldn't know it were it not for this passage and others like it. And it's helpful to know who really wields the power. If Jesus is the one who really wields the power, there's no point then in looking to other gods or practicing superstition or consulting horoscopes. If Jesus wields the power, why bother praying to Mary, or to any of the other saints. If Jesus wields they power, if Jesus is stronger than the devil, it means he's stronger than anything or anyone in your life. Do you have an addiction? Jesus is stronger. A progressive disease? Jesus is stronger. Do you have a husband or boyfriend who seems to think he owns you? No one owns you but the Lord Jesus Christ, but he's no slave master. He is kind, humble and merciful. You are his child by Holy Baptism; not even the devil can unwind that.

The miracles always teach us things, and I think the questions and fears of the demon possessed man point us to another important lesson. Remember what the mouth said? "What have you to do with us? Have you come to destroy us?" Jesus chose not to give answer, but I think we know the answer: "Why yes, actually! I have come to destroy you and all your works." It's there in 1 John 3:8, "The reason the

Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.” Paul assures us of the same at the end of his letter to the Romans: “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” (Rom. 16:20). And Jesus himself talks about Judgment Day when he will say to those on his left, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Mt. 25:41). Mark puts it right up front and center in his Gospel. It’s the first miracle of Jesus he records, and with it is the announcement that yes, Jesus has come to destroy the devil and his angels.

Hell understands. Hell gets it. Clearly, hell remembers the curse God spoke thousands of years before right there in the Garden of Eden. “Because you have done this, cursed are you . . . on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall crush your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” That’s Jesus who will do that. The serpent heard the threat and remembered. And now, after all the centuries, hell’s worst nightmare is coming true.

It makes me think of that Christmas Carol written by Benjamin Britten. “This little Babe so few days old, is come to rifle Satan’s fold; All hell doth at His presence quake, Though He Himself for cold doth shake.”

Hell gets it. Hell understands who Jesus is and why he has come. Hell knows exactly what the stakes are, and. It’s why the devil went after Jesus right away with Herod’s order for the slaughter of the infants in Bethlehem. It’s why the devil tried tempting Jesus in the wilderness, because if Jesus caves in at just one point, we’ve lost our Savior. It’s why Satan seems to have taken control of Peter’s mouth when Peter tried to convince Jesus to avoid Jerusalem and the cross. Who knows how many times the devil tempted or attacked Jesus, but these are recorded to show hell hasn’t forgotten the threat made way back in Genesis 3 and God hasn’t forgotten the promise.

When Jesus went to the cross, God was making good on that threat. His death and resurrection not only overcame

sin and its wages. It was also a victory against the devil. Make no mistake: when Jesus descended into hell it wasn't to suffer more. No, Peter tells us he more or less stormed the gates of hell and announced the victory, right there in the middle of the devil's own fortress, and there was nothing, (nothing!) the devil could do about it. This same Jesus now sits at the right hand of God and reigns over heaven and earth, and the devil can't do anything about that either. And this same Jesus promises one day soon to put a final end to the devil and his angels.

That is, this little miracle in Capernaum is a small preview of something much larger still to come. Inside that ancient synagogue, the people heard one single shriek from one single demon that was being forced to go where it did not want to go. On the last day and around the globe, there will be a loud chorus of shrieks when the Lord drives them all and sends all of them where they do not want to go, to what John calls the lake of fire and brimstone (Rev. 20).

It might seem strange to our ears that God would be so merciless. In the Scriptures, God surprises us with his mercy time and time again, but he never has mercy on the devil or his demons. They were cursed in the beginning and they remain cursed today. Jesus prayed the father to forgive even those who crucified him, but when it comes to demons he shows no mercy, for he came to "destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil" (Hebrews).

Hell knows that final curse is still coming. Hell knows there's nothing it can do to prevent that day, because God keeps his promises, no matter how old. And even hell understands that between now and then, he shall stand, come what may, and the children of God shall live under God's protection. For "neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers . . . can separate us from his love in Christ Jesus our Lord." Thanks be to God. Amen.

