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**“The Inevitable Echo”**

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*“‘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).*

Once I was visiting the great cathedral in Cologne, Germany. It’s the largest gothic cathedral in Northern Europe, attracting thousands of visitors each day. It was late Advent; a man was tuning the massive organ, presumably in preparation for Christmas services and concerts. He took a little break, and that’s when a traveling children’s choir from France walked up to the front and began an impromptu concert. They sang beautiful, delicate French Christmas carols, one after another. They were not the Vienna Boys Choir, nor were they very far from that kind of quality. We gathered around and listened . . . and felt so fortunate to be there. “Blessed” is not too big a word to describe the moment: sacred music in a sacred space . . . at a sacred time.

But remember that fellow trying to tune the organ? Evidently he ran out of patience because when the choir began yet another carol he pulled out all the stops, and though I couldn’t see it, I picture him coming down on as many keys as he possibly could. It was a loud and horrible noise; the devil’s own flatulence. Sacred time and sacred space and sacred music brought to an abrupt and ugly end.

Something like that happened once about 2,000 years ago in the cool and quiet sanctuary of the synagogue in Capernaum, there on the northern shores of the Sea of Galilee. At the time, Capernaum was a village of about 1500 residents, all served by this one synagogue. Archaeologists have long known where it is and are carefully excavating the site yet today. 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. The synagogue was built to last. And it did. Archaeologists believe it was already about two hundred years old when Jesus entered it. It was rebuilt again in the fourth century and was finally abandoned in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. It was a place that never heard loud voices. It was a place that smelled of oil lamps and beeswax candles and of incense. Made of thick, dense, white stone, it offered cool comfort in a hot climate. It was a place of fine linens and colorful wool weavings. It was a place of worship.

It was the custom of synagogue leaders to invite visiting rabbis to teach or expound on a passage from the Torah. Now there was a way you were supposed to do this, namely by citing precedent and quoting other authorities. A teacher would make a point about the Torah and would draw from other well-known rabbis and scribes in support of the point. He would quote well-known authoritative figures, not unlike a

lawyer today citing previous cases that have been tried. But Jesus didn't teach this way. He didn't quote others. He didn't draw from other authorities. 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 had a ring of truth to them. To those in Capernaum, it was like a breath of fresh air. They knew they were listening to something rare and special. They would remember this for the rest of their days. Quote, "They were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes." "Blessed" is not too big a word to describe how they felt.

Now, in the middle of this, a man suddenly starts shouting at Jesus. His words bounce off the hard walls and floors of the sanctuary. It was all so abrupt and chilling and inappropriate. Sacred time and space are violated; and once again, the pestiferous stink of the devil is in the air. That is, there's something strange about this man, something uncanny and sinister in what he says. Mark says the man has an unclean spirit. "What do you want with **us**, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?"

There's nothing about this man that looks odd. He doesn't have little horns sprouting from his scalp. But it's as if the mouth saying these words is no longer in control; it has been usurped, along with the rest of him. Something else has taken over. It's frightening. "*I* know who you are" the voice says, "the Holy One of God!"

Demon possession was probably as rare a condition back then as it is today. But somehow the simple presence and the words of Jesus stir them up wherever he goes. Demons prefer quiet anonymity, I think, but Jesus has a way of agitating them, like the screws of a ship churning up the water and bringing stuff to the surface.

No one in the synagogue knows what to do about this man shouting strange things, no one but Jesus. Jesus says one word: "*phimotheti!*" "Silence!" "Muzzle it!" would also work. Immediately the quiet of the synagogue is restored. And then a few more words, "Come out of him!"

This too was a different way of doing business. Usually there would have been elaborate incantations and spells and rituals. It was all very costly, and not very effective, probably no more so than a placebo. But with Jesus, one firm, authoritative word will suffice. When the Lord says "Silence!" a demon simply must acquiesce. He has no other choice. He cannot resist. He simply must be quiet. And when Jesus says, "Come out of him!" a demon cannot resist that either. The man cries out. His body convulses. Wouldn't that be like the devil, to get in one last lick on his way out?

And did you notice this bizarre character already knows who Jesus is? He identified Jesus as "The Holy One of God." The disciples would need a whole lot more time before they came around to confessing this. Thomas wouldn't buy it until after the resurrection! But in the Gospels the demon possessed are always the first to figure it out. They know. So of all the people in Capernaum, the only one who has it right is this man possessed by an evil spirit. You recall the heavens bore witness to Jesus at his birth with the angels and the star. Now hell is also bearing witness to him. Hell understands . . . and trembles.

And isn't it interesting that even though the demon gets it right, Jesus muzzles him. Apparently, Jesus didn't want the truth out yet. There's more to do first. Moreover,

he much prefers the truth to come out as a confession of faith, rather than a fearful acknowledgement. Philippians says at the end, at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.” Some will confess it in faith. The rest will be acknowledging what they can no longer deny. Jesus would much prefer this confession to come out of trusting faith than terrified acknowledgment.

So Jesus has just expelled this demon. The spectators in the synagogue are astonished. “What is this?” they’re asking each other, wondering if their eyes and ears betrayed them or if they really did just witness something absolutely extraordinary.

In Mark, it’s the first recorded miracle . . . evil surrendering to Jesus. “Come out of him!” is the command, and then comes the echo, “The evil spirit came out of him.” Jesus needs only say a word and helplessly, the demons yield. Could it be the same thing going on here also went on “*in the beginning*”? When God said, “Let there be light” there’s an echo, “and there was light.” So when Jesus says to the raging sea, “Be quiet!” the only possible outcome is silence. When Jesus says “Little girl, I say to you, get up!” we know what’s going to happen next. There will be an echo. “And the little girl got up.” When Jesus says, “Lazarus, come forth” even a dead man has no other choice. When Jesus says to a paralytic, “Your sins are forgiven” well then “peace with God once more is made.” When Jesus says to the same man, “Get up, take your mat and go home” you just know what the next verse is going to say.

And when Jesus says from the cross, “It is finished” he means it. It’s over. The Lamb of God has taken away the sins of the world. There’s nothing we need to do to add to efficacy of his death or complete it. For you, for me, for all mankind, for all time, “it is finished.” We stand redeemed. And when we hear those words, “I baptize you. . .” that means now have a little child of Christ at the font. “Here we bring a child of nature; Home we take a newborn creature.” When Jesus says, “Take drink, this is my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sins” that wine has no other alternatives. It has been backed up into a corner. It is as vulnerable to God’s Word as are the demons. The wine simply must concede. In fact, there is no other possible outcome than it being blood for the forgiveness of sins. Though we do not and cannot understand the why and how of it, we trust this authoritative Word. We believe in the echo. It’s not a matter of whether it’s possible. It’s a matter of whether God said it.

When Jesus says, “Love one another as I have loved you” do we really have any other choice? He’s not asking our opinion on the matter. And when he says, “Forgive one another as I have forgiven you” does that give us the permission to chew the cud of resentment? When he says, “You are the light of the world” he’s not asking us to think about being the light of the world, or try harder to be the light of the world. No, ready or not, “you are the light of the world.” And when he says, “Go, make disciples of all nations. . .” that means we have work to do when we wake up in the morning.

The Word of God is authoritative and powerful. When God commands something to happen, it happens. Even those who are diametrically opposed to God cannot resist his Word. You recall after his death Jesus descended into hell. He didn’t go there to suffer because that was already “finished”. He went there to proclaim the victory, right there in

the middle of the devil's own fortress, and the devil couldn't do a thing about it. This same Jesus is risen and ascended and sits at the right hand of God and is king over heaven and earth. He reigns with power and with grace. And so, as Paul wrote, 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.

Do you believe in demons? I do. But I believe stronger still in Jesus, and in the echo of his authoritative Word and the inevitable outcomes of his promises. Amen.