

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany (b)
Deuteronomy 18:15-20 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 Mark 1:21-28
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
January 31, 2021 (Traditional)

We're still only in the first chapter of Mark...hardly into the gospel yet. But the moment Jesus starts preaching publicly in the synagogue in today's gospel, this hostile, tyrannical force rises up and starts attacking him and getting in his face. So, we see fierce opposition to Jesus from the first days of his ministry. Out of that poor tortured human being, the demon creepily says ""What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are. You are the holy one from God." Remember that at this early point in the story, none of the people really know the full significance of Jesus...who he was or what he came to do. But those demons...they knew who he was right away! They knew him on sight. And you hear the terror in the demon's voice; he knows that his end is at hand. He's standing in the presence of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the promised Savior, the final judge. The demon seems surprised that the judge has already come, doesn't he? He's terrified because he knows that for him, it's "game over."

We get these occasional glimpses into the spiritual, cosmic warfare that's going on underneath the surface of the gospels. While Jesus is healing people—bringing sight to the blind and speech to the mute, strength to the weak and life to the dead—we also see him casting out those demons: literally flushing the power of evil out into the light of day and destroying it. It's really all ONE THING that he's doing: whether he's teaching or healing, he's casting out that tyrannical power from our lives. That power that keeps us locked up isolated in ourselves, chained to our own despair. As Luther

puts it in his greatest hit song: “No strength of ours can match [the devil’s] might! We would be lost, rejected. But now a champion comes to fight, whom God himself elected.”

As believers we can sometimes forget that we’re living in the final stages of a war. Jesus came to claim the world for himself. To gather us up under God’s wing. Under whose reign are you and I going to live? In his own words, he came to “Bind up the strong man and plunder his house.” On his cross, he won the decisive battle in the war for you and me. At Easter, he plundered the enemy’s house; he redeemed you and me from the tyrant’s power. And now, baptized into his death and his victory, you and I can live under his loving Lordship every day. We can live in that beautiful promise that no matter what happens in our lives, we’re on our way to final, complete victory in Jesus.

Now before we go farther, let’s acknowledge the obvious. Today’s world is not comfortable talking in these terms, is it? It does not want to talk about a cosmic power of evil that’s too big for human beings to handle. I’ll never forget the televised worship service that took place a few days after 9/11, at the big cathedral in Washington DC. All of the major political figures were there. And at one point the congregation sang Luther’s hymn, “A Mighty Fortress.” Kudos to whoever picked the hymns that day. But when they got to the part where it says “Though hordes of devils fill the land all threat’ning to devour us, we tremble not, unmoved we stand; they cannot overpower us,” you could see obvious uncomfortable expressions on many of those representatives’ and senators’ faces. It was like, “Are we really talking about devils here, in 2001?” And now 20 years later, even more so, many people have an immediate negative reaction, when the subjects of sin or evil come up. Why? Probably because a

lot of people have come to fully believe there's a human solution to every problem. There's nothing we cannot fix. That's the popular belief now. As believers we know it's dangerous. We remember what Peter says: "Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour." There's a real danger in not knowing who the real enemy is, in not being aware of his power.

Take the 20th century, for example. As human beings made massive strides in their understanding of the universe, as they were starting to manipulate matter on an atomic level, as they were discovering DNA, evil ran wild on a mass scale as never seen before in history. The Soviets, the Nazis, the communist leaders in China, the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia: the rulers of these countries sincerely believed they could fix everything, including people. They did not believe in any evil that was not human centered. They thought that if they just changed people's education and attitudes, everything would be good. They thought they could perfect human society through knowledge and rational planning. The results are now history, for all of us to see: Human catastrophe, genocide, misery on a monstrous level.

We Christians understand that no matter how much we know about the universe, there's this active power that's very close to us, so close that we're blind to it; it's bigger than any of us. And it's actively working on us. It lives in our blind spot. It's always ready to twist whatever knowledge we have, and our actions, into that tyranny of thinking we've got all the solutions...that we have the final word. The truth is, when we don't acknowledge sin and the power of the real adversary, that's when we are most vulnerable to his power. When we don't acknowledge the power of sin and evil in all

our lives, we start blaming other human beings for all the problems of the world. Usually that devolves into blaming particular groups of people. Just like the Nazis and Soviets did. Meanwhile, the real enemy is loving his opportunity to bring misery to us all. An unwillingness to acknowledge sin: it goes a long way to explain the spirit of hatred that characterizes so much of what we're seeing in our country right now.

On a more individual level, I keep thinking about a movie called *The War Room* that came out a few years back. Critics were not especially kind to that very Christian movie. But it struck a lot of chords with me. The dynamics in that movie are so true to what I've seen in my own life and other believers'. It's about a family that's falling apart. The husband is being unfaithful, the wife is miserable, trying to keep her head above water; the kids are struggling in that painful situation. The turning point comes when the wife finally stops trying to fix everything herself. Instead, after a lot of prayer, she gets up and in the name of Jesus Christ her Savior, she tells the devil to get out of her life and out of her house. She tells him that it's time for him to leave her family alone. It's powerful, because she finally realizes that she is in the grip of something too big for her to handle by herself. She's identified the real adversary. She's a sophisticated, successful 21st century woman, she knows all the psychological language. But the turnaround happens when she stops trying to play chess with life and God and the people around her. She stops trying to figure out how she alone can fix the mess. She stops trying to teach her husband how to act like a man. Instead, finally, she identifies the origin of the hatred that holds her in thrall. She gives up all her delusions of control and throws herself into the arms of the Champion who has come to fight for her...Jesus Christ. And from that point on, she's a dynamo. She's set free. She's not going to waste her time trying to force everything to the right outcome any more. Instead, she is transformed by faith in Jesus into an instrument of the Holy Spirit; she

becomes person of real power. She tells her husband she's done trying to fix him; it's up to him to start living up, not to her, but to God. Jesus releases her from her anger, her guilt, her shame, so that she can take charge over things she really has control over, and let go of the things she cannot change.

Sometimes believers, when we talk about the devil, are accused of blaming him for all our problems, like it's a way of not taking responsibility for our lives. The truth is the opposite. Knowing our champion, Jesus Christ—who has won the ultimate battle for us against an enemy who's too big for us to handle—actually helps us take full responsibility for the power that God *has* given us in this life. Once we're done falsely thinking we can fix everything, we experience this new beautiful freedom to fix what we can. We can leave the end of the war in God's hands. It's not always easy to discern where that line is, in each situation...the line between letting go and taking hold. But we always know where to start. We come at each problem knowing that our lives and our futures are not going to come not from us, but from our Father who loves us. When we trust that promise—the tyrant knows he's got to step aside. When we've lost our fear of death and loss, the enemy has lost his power over us.

Jesus came to break that power of fear. He came to bind up the strong man and to break us free from our dependence on ourselves and all the other false gods. And we can live every day knowing that the name of Jesus has **power**. As Luther says; "Let this world's tyrant rage, in battle we'll engage! His might is doomed to fail; God's judgment must prevail. One little word subdues him." The little Word is Jesus. In the name of Jesus, you and I can name our demons, and tell them to get out. Whenever they hear his name coming out of our mouths, they know it's *game over*.