**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church**

**Watertown, WI (920) 261-2570**

**“The Utter Collapse of the Devil’s Strength”**

Rev. David K. Groth

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*“And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, ‘What have You to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are – the Holy One of God.’ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent and come out of him!’ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him”* (Mark 1:23-26).

Don’t be too quick to write off demon possession as mental illness or epilepsy or some other disease. And don’t be too quick to think this text is just a product of first century superstitions, and that we’ve grown much more sophisticated and are now above such nonsense. Instead, think it through with me.

First, either Jesus did or did not know this man was possessed by an evil spirit. If Jesus **did not** know the real condition was some sort of mental illness, then we have a Savior who was as ignorant as His first century peers. If He **did** know this man was mentally ill (and was not demon-possessed), then we have a Savior who could act a lie. Not only act a lie, we have a Savior who would propagate a lie by telling His first apostles they too had the authority to expel demons. And to say Jesus only “accommodated Himself” to first century beliefs also doesn’t hold water. Jesus never accommodated untruths, regardless of how widely and strongly held. Part of what got Him crucified was His insistence on the Truth. And if this man were only psychotic, how was it Jesus was able to heal him by saying, “Come out of him!” That would not work any better then than it would today. Moreover, even though God is good and all-powerful, the existence of evil in the world certainly suggests the reality of an evil one, one who lies and deceives and tempts us to evil and wickedness. Countless instances of extreme cruelty, violence, and injustice are tangible manifestations of his evil. And you know within yourself there’s a force that opposes good and encourages sin.

I would further ask, “What is gained by purging your Bible and your faith of the existence of demons?” Will it make it any easier for you to believe the rest of Scripture, so long as there are no devils, no demons, no hell? I doubt it.

What do you lose by denying the existence of demons? The integrity of Jesus? The reliability of Scripture? You would also be putting yourself at risk because the most dangerous enemy is the one we think doesn’t exist.

C.S. Lewis wrote, “There are two equal and opposite errors” we can make with the devils. “One is to disbelieve their existence. The other is to believe and feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. [The devils] are equally pleased by both errors” (p. 3, *Screwtape Letters*). So you can’t just say, “Well I don’t believe in demons,” and assume that settles it. Anyone who takes Jesus seriously takes the devil seriously.

In our text, Jesus is teaching in the synagogue of Capernaum. Suddenly a man starts shouting at Jesus. It was all so loud and startling and inappropriate. The quiet of 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?” In the Greek, it has the sense of, “Go away. Leave us alone.” (Notice the plural “us.”) “What do You want with us? 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. “***I*** know who You are” the mouth says, “the Holy One of God!” as if an accusation. I suppose for him, it is.

He already knows who Jesus is. In the Gospels, the demon-possessed were among the first to figure it out. 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. “Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.” Now hell is also bearing witness to Him with demons. “I know who You are – the Holy one of God!” Wherever Jesus goes now, His very presence seems to excite and agitate and expose others who are demon possessed.

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, spells, and rituals, but none of it was of much help. How could it be? Maybe 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 beyond mere placebo effect.

In contrast Jesus says, “Quiet!” Literally, “Muzzle it!” And then, “Come out of him!” No incantations. No spells or bells or incense. Just a few simple words . . . but with authority. When Jesus says, “Quiet!,” a demon has no other choice. He cannot resist it. And when Jesus says, “Come out of him!” a demon cannot say “no” to that either. So, the evil spirit shook the man violently and came out with a shriek.

The miracles always have something to teach us, and this one does as well. It certainly tells us about the power of His authoritative Word which quieted demons and puts them to flight. And it tells us Jesus is stronger than the devil. Of course, we know that, but we wouldn’t know it were it not for this passage and others like it. We don’t adhere to dualism with good and evil battling it out with more or less equal strength. No, this is the Creator unraveling the devil’s strength and silencing a bothersome noise.

Jesus is the One with all the power, and it’s helpful to remember that. If Jesus wields all the power, there’s no point then in looking to other gods, practicing superstition, or consulting spiritists. We look to Jesus alone. If Jesus wields the real power, why bother asking for the intercession of Mary or any of the other saints? If Jesus wields the 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 thinks he owns you? Only Jesus through Holy Baptism owns you, and He’s no taskmaster. He is merciful and humble and loves you.

The miracles always teach us. Remember what the mouth asked Him? “Have You come to destroy us?” Jesus doesn’t say it, but I think we know the answer: “Why yes, actually! I have come to destroy you, and all your works too, and all your ways!” It’s there in 1 John, “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (3:8). Paul says the same in Romans: “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” (Rom. 16:20). And Jesus also 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). In the Gospel according to Mark, this is the first miracle, and it announces that Jesus has come to destroy the devil.

And the devil understands. The devil well remembers the curse God spoken thousands of years before to the serpent in the garden. “Because you have done this, cursed are you . . . I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and her offspring; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.” 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 [ransack] Satan’s fold; All hell doth at His presence quake, Though He Himself for cold doth shake.”

Hell understands who Jesus is and why He has come. It’s why Herod ordered the slaughter of the infants in Bethlehem. Surely the stink of the devil was in Herod’s palace that day. It’s why the devil himself tried to tempt Jesus in the wilderness, because if at any point Jesus succumbs, 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 circumvent the cross. “Get behind me, Satan” said to him. Hell hasn’t forgotten the threat in Genesis 3.

On the cross, God made good on that threat. His death and resurrection not only overcame sin and its wages. It was also the victory over the devil. And when Jesus descended into hell, it wasn’t to suffer more. Peter tells us it was to proclaim the victory, right there in the middle of the devil’s own stronghold, and there was not a darn thing the devil could do about it.

Inside that ancient synagogue in Capernaum, 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 whole earth, there will be loud choruses of shrieks when the Lord drives them all out and sends all of them where they do not want to go.

It may seem strange that God would be so merciless. In the Bible, God constantly surprises us with His mercy, even on those who crucified Him. Yet, He does not have even a shred of mercy for the devil or his demons. They were cursed in the beginning, and they remain cursed today. Why? Hebrews 2:14, He came to “destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.”

Hell knows that final curse is already on the horizon. Hell knows it is powerless to prevent that day. For even hell knows and grieves that God keeps His promises to His people, no matter how ancient those promises are. Thanks be to God. Amen.