

Mark 1:21-28

This brief narrative could have come with the disclaimer: *Do not attempt this at home*. Attempt what? Casting out an evil spirit (in the way that Jesus did). His words are clear, simple, and direct: “*Be silent, and come out of him!*” Were you or I to use that same approach, we would be met with strong resistance. We might even find ourselves fleeing for our life. The demons recognized Jesus. They don’t know us from a hole in the wall. If we presume to take to ourselves the authority that belongs only to God, we will soon discover our place on the totem pole: at the very bottom.

But the demons are clever. Martin Luther tells the story of a monk at a cloister not far from Eisleben, where Luther was born, who commanded a possessed person to open his mouth and let him put two fingers in it and not bite him. And this happened. This monk also commanded the devil to depart from the man when a little bell in the church was rung. And this also happened. Did this monk have authority over the demons? Hardly, continues Luther. The demon was smart. He was strengthening the poor people in this town in the delusion and lie that that little bell was so holy, that when it was rung, the demons had to flee at the sound of it, thus eliminating their need for the Word of God, and exterminating their faith in Christ. After all, who needs Jesus, and who need to gather around the Word when we have our little bell to deliver us from the demons!

Our narrative in St. Mark is just one of many instances where Jesus encounters demons. It seems to us that the devils are crawling out of every nook and cranny as Jesus walks from town to town. And they are. When God becomes incarnate in the person of Jesus, all hell breaks loose! The devils come out of hiding to oppose the Lord, for He comes to unmask Satan.

I have a friend who encountered this while in Africa. All was quiet and peaceful in the village where he was assigned. But when he came to translate the holy Word of God into the language of the people, the demons came out of hiding and tried to scare my friend away.

You can be absolutely certain that we are not alone here this morning. And I’m not, in this instance, referring to the fact that God is here with us. Yes, He is...and so are the devils. And they’re smart; smarter than us. And they are clever. They do not need to show themselves. They do not need to take possession of someone in our midst and cry out as was done in the synagogue in Capernaum. They much prefer to work silently behind their masks so that we do not recognize them.

They hide behind the mask of indifference. “Just another Sunday service,” they whisper to us, “you know all this already. Pay no attention. Instead, get out your phone and check Facebook.” They hide behind the mask of a bad conscience. “When that pastor up there says that you are forgiven, he doesn’t mean you. What you did is too horrible a sin.” They hide behind the mask of pride. “You don’t need to listen to that preacher. You don’t even need a pastor at all. You’re so strong a Christian that you can coast into heaven.”

Why do the demons hide behind such masks? Well, look at how successful they are. Not just here, but in every congregation. This is not Capernaum where the demons thought it best to possess people. This is small-town America. The demons see that we are already possessed by Facebook, by making money, by recreation and sports, by relationships, and by so much more. They can hide themselves and encourage us to be possessed by these things and not by the Word of God. And even when we come, like today, to hear the Word, the devils remind us not to pay much attention to it. And so far they are quite content with their success.

We do not have a little bell to drive the devils away. We don’t even think we need that. “I was confirmed years ago. I learned all I need to know back then.” That type of thinking, my friends, is how the demons are smarter than us. When they can convince us that we don’t need to gather around the Word of God regularly, hungrily, they have already won. When they can trick us into thinking that our baptism is only a thing in the past, and not our everyday weapon against them, the demons gloat at their success. And when they put us into the habit of

treating the Holy Supper as a “take it or leave it meal,” and not as our defense against them, the demons laugh with delight.

The less God’s people are in the Word, the more emboldened the demons become. They are like a pack of wolves. When one wolf trips up his victim and separates it from the rest of the herd, the other wolves in the pack come running, sensing victory, and they devour that victim.

Your safe place is not within yourself. If you think you know the Bible well enough; that your faith is strong enough - you are that victim. No one can tangle one-on-one with the devils. Your safe place is with Jesus. He alone defeats Satan. He alone has authority over the devils.

That poor possessed man in Capernaum’s synagogue had no chance except for the fact that Jesus was there. That man could not escape his demon. But Jesus freed him of it. Jesus did not need to raise His voice against it. He did not need to shout the words, “*Be silent, and come out of him!*” His authority over all the devils is not in the way He spoke the words, but in the words He spoke.

I do not need to be a fiery, charismatic preacher, like those on TV, for Jesus to be at work among you. I just need to speak His words truthfully. The power is in the words of the Lord, not in how well I speak them.

And so you and I, my friends, want to be possessed by the words of Jesus in the same way that an addict is possessed by drugs. We need our daily “fix” of God’s Word. We cannot even imagine going through a week without being here in the house of our God hearing His words to us, and at His Table eating and drinking His Sacrament for us.

To be possessed is something our Lord is familiar with. He was so possessed by His love for you that He gave Himself up completely to suffering and crucifixion. He had the authority to rebuke His enemies and put them up on the cross and gloat over them. But He laid His authority aside, and He accepted the awful burden that was placed upon Him. And it’s because He was possessed by you. Jesus had one goal - to win salvation for you. And He let nothing stand in His way.

And He is still possessed by you. What He did in Capernaum He is doing constantly here for you. He is keeping the demons at bay. He is holding their mouths shut. He is defending you like a shield wall. His words are spoken here so that you listen carefully and apply them to yourself. There’s no way the devils can trip you up when you do that. You will see through their lies and masks.

No, this is not just another Sunday service. This is where heaven and earth meet. This is where Jesus fills you with His grace. Yes, that pastor does mean you when he says you are forgiven. No sin of yours is too horrible to forgive. Jesus died for all of them. He died for all of you. Yes, every one of you is completely forgiven. And no, you are not going to coast into heaven. It’s a struggle all the way. You will never be strong enough to fight your way in. But you have Jesus. And He carries you there.

Friends, we need to pray for each other; pray every day for each other; pray that we ourselves, our loved ones, and our church family become, and remain, possessed by the words of Jesus. I do this for you. Will you do it for me and for each other? We are the herd that needs to stay together; together in Christ, in His Word and Sacrament. No devil can overcome that. Amen.