

Mark 1:21-28

When the movie, “Jaws,” was released some years ago, it had the effect of keeping people out of the water. A number of vacationers changed their plans that summer. Instead of traveling to the oceanfront, they traveled inland, well away from “shark-infested” waters. Jaws was a scary movie, but the horror of it was largely erased by avoiding those places where the great white shark lived. If today’s text, on the other hand, was made into a movie (and it has been somewhat with exorcism films), viewers would be haunted by nightmares and there would be no escape. To avoid sharks, one must simply stay on dry ground; but where does a person go to avoid the horror of demons? Hollywood knows this, and that’s why some of the scariest films ever made have to do with demon-possession.

A man in Capernaum was plagued by such a possession. He came to the synagogue where Jesus was teaching and he began to mock Him: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?” It was the demon speaking. No one caught this scene with a video camera, but if someone had, we would be just as amazed as were the people there watching. The exorcism was performed in front of them all. “Be silent,” Jesus commanded the demon, “And come out of him!” And this scene would forever be etched in our nightmares—as the demon obeyed, it convulsed the man’s body twisting him into something which looked almost unhuman, and with a scream, enough to curdle your blood, the demon came out of the man and flew off looking for another body in which to live.

And if Hollywood got their hands on this particular text, the haunting questions etched in people’s minds as they would be leaving the theater would be these: “Am I next? Is there a demon looking for me? Where can I hide? Where can I go for safety?” Hollywood may create the questions, but the Christian Faith gives us the answers. It may sound a little strange to your ears, but you need to go into the water. To avoid great whites, Jaws’s moviegoers stay out of the water; but to be safe from demons, into the water is exactly where we must go.

It may have been long ago for many of you, but your Christian parents brought you to that very water when you were baptized. We were helpless, just like the man in Capernaum. Satan had his way with him, and he also had charge over us. Demon-possession is not something that the people in Capernaum ran to the local drugstore to find a cure for. No one could master the devil then, and none of us today can either. When Jesus cast out the demon in Capernaum, the people saw in Him the power and authority of God. And for that same reason your Christian parents brought you to the water of baptism because in that water there is Jesus with the power of God destroying the works of the devil. “He (Jesus) delivered us,” writes the Apostle Paul, “From the domain of darkness.” In your baptism, Paul goes on, “He disarmed ‘Satan.’”

You belong, not to the devil, but to Christ for this reason—you are baptized in Christ Jesus. We were born from our mothers possessed by Satan, but we were born again through baptism to be possessed by Christ. You do not need to fear demon-possession. Jesus, within the water of baptism, has claimed you for His own, and His power is greater than the power of the devil.

Why then do we foolishly venture out of the water? In Jaws, after the shark claimed a victim, no one dared to leave the safety of the beach...at first. But then when the danger

appeared to be over, a few, and then many swimmers went back into the ocean. And you can guess what happened. The great white soon claimed more victims.

For Christians it's just the opposite. Our safe haven is in the water. To leave the water is not brave...it's foolish. We would have an easier time battling a great white shark than doing battle with Satan. As a shark never stops to rest, so the devil never stops seeking you and me. His jaws are always open to devour us. He never shows himself to us. He remains hidden in the guise of temptation so that we leave the safety of our baptism and walk foolishly into his trap.

You and I do that when we bite and devour each other with our angry words; when we hold a grudge and refuse to forgive those who hurt our loved ones; when we live as though God's Word did not matter. When you and I neglect the Lord's body and blood we put ourselves in danger of walking away from our baptism. Our Savior urges us to partake of His Sacrament often because through bread and wine He enters us in order to fight against the works of the devil for us. To pass up the privilege of coming to worship, over and over again, puts one in danger of walking away from their baptism. "Man does not live on bread alone," Jesus says, "But by every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God." The words, the forgiveness of Christ given here are life itself, and are your safe haven.

Fish are born in water and they live in water. How foolish for a fish to jump out of the water onto dry ground. It will die unless someone puts it back into the water. And so with us. Christians, like fish, are born in baptism's water. We live in that water within Jesus' church. To stop hearing His words and partaking of His body and blood is to jump out of the water. It's to reject our baptism. It's to part ways with our Savior. And like a fish out of the water, we are easy prey for the devil. We will die unless our Lord, through a parent, or a Christian friend, or a church member or pastor, puts us back into the water.

We're never told what happened to that man in Capernaum. Did he begin to follow Jesus? Freed from the demon, did he look to Christ as his new Master? Or did that demon later return to him and again possess him? We do know that Jesus freed him from Satan's power, and that once freed it was the Lord's desire for that man to stay, like a fish, in the water with Christ...hearing His words...living by them. This is also the Lord's desire for you and me.

Jesus knows full well that you and I often give in to Satan's temptations; that we do not daily live as His dear possession; and that we struggle with guilt because of this. That's why He died for you. He was dragged like a fish out of water to a hill called Golgotha and nailed there upon a cross for you. And because He did this on your behalf; and because He rose triumphantly from the dead; and because He now lives within His Word and Sacraments for you, there is forgiveness for you, my friend.

You're like fish in water. As fish swim in a lake, the water is full of life for them. With every gulp of water that goes in and then out through their gills, life-giving oxygen enters them. Fish live within this rich water. Wherever they go in the lake they are always immersed in and surrounded by this life-giving water. Friend and fellow sinner, this is your life within the church. As lake water is full of oxygen for fish, so your baptism is full of forgiveness for you. As fish take in oxygen from the water, so your ears, week after week, take in Jesus' life-giving words and your mouth takes in His precious flesh and blood.

Perhaps we should ask Jesus the same question the demon asked Him: What have you to do with me? He was there in Capernaum to drive out the demon, but He is here because of His love for you. Jesus is not here to be against you; He is here to be for you. He destroyed Satan's power over you so that today you can live in peace and joy. If you have been living like a fish out of the water, Jesus is not here to condemn you; He forgives you, and with His words of pardon puts you back into the water of your baptism.

What does He have to do with you? He is your Savior. He is life and salvation for you, and He urges each and every one of us to remain and abide with Him in the water. And thus, as you watch the big game later today with friends; and as you go to work in St. Louis tomorrow; and as you go to school this week in Augusta, remember who you are—you are possessed by Jesus, through baptism, out of grace and mercy toward you. You are His fish, living in His water, within His church, where there is always forgiveness and life for you. Amen.