

“Satan, Meet the Master” Mark 1:21-28
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Some of you probably remember back in the mid-70s when “The Exorcist” came out – a movie with Linda Blair as the teenager who was demon-possessed. Others may have heard of it and perhaps seen it, because the movie has become iconic of horror films. Full disclosure: I have not seen it; horror movies just aren’t my thing – so I’m not recommending it. What interests me is its backstory.

The movie is based on an actual event. Originally, it wasn’t a girl, but a boy who was possessed, a young teenager from a Lutheran family. He was given the pseudonym, Roland Doe. Roland (or Robbie) was an only child with few playmates his own age. So he turned to the adults in his family for companionship – in particular, to his Aunt Harriet, who was a spiritualist. She introduced Robbie to the Ouija Board. Robbie was about 13 years old when she died. It is assumed that he tried to contact her through the Ouija Board -- and that’s where all the trouble started. Long story short, 9 pastors (including the family pastor and various Roman Catholic priests) were among the 39 witnesses to the events. Several highly respected people believed this to be an actual case of demon possession. And I’m happy to report that at the end of the day, Robbie was freed and went on to lead a normal, happy life.

Well, what are we, as modern American Christians (and Lutherans) to make of this? You see, it’s not just a matter of a story or movie. The *Bible* speaks of evil powers, of demons and Satan. We heard it this morning – in all three lessons. Moses warned God’s people not to dabble in sorcery or divination. Rather, they are to consult a prophet of God and listen to God’s word. The Apostle Paul warned Christians that we are engaged in a spiritual battle – and therefore should suit up in spiritual armor. In our Gospel reading, Jesus is in the thick of the battle. It’s in the Bible; it’s something that we need to take seriously.

Let’s take a look at our text. It’s a simple story. Jesus is teaching in a synagogue. A demon-possessed man accosts him. Jesus commands the demon to leave and he does so. The people are amazed at this demonstration of power. This new rabbi teaches with authority, and has authority over evil spirits as well. What’s going on?

Well, the context gives us some clues. In the beginning of Mark’s Gospel John the Baptist appears, paving the way for the Messiah. What does John say of Jesus? That he will come in the *power* of the *Holy Spirit*. In his baptism Jesus is affirmed as God’s Son, on whom the Holy Spirit rests. And then immediately (Mark’s favorite word) Jesus goes out to the desert to be tested by Satan. The lines are drawn. The real battle lies between Jesus and Satan. And it is no small battle.

What is Jesus’ first miracle, according to Mark? Jesus exorcizes a demon. Do you see where this is going? Mark is making an important point: Jesus, the Holy One of God, is more powerful than the evil one. Jesus is greater than Satan. And that’s good news! That’s the message you and I are meant to hear today. Pure and simple.

Now, as modern Americans, we are often uncomfortable with these texts. We're unsure what place Satan have in the 21st century worldview. Today we have an opportunity to bring the matter to the front burner. What do modern scholars have to say about it?

According to C. S. Lewis, two equal and opposite errors are typically made, even within the Church. The first is a modernistic tendency to deny the existence of Satan. During the 19th century Enlightenment, theologians began to dismiss demonic power and speak rather of illness, epilepsy and psychiatric disorders. That has shaped our thinking in the 21st century. It shapes my thinking. In most situations my instinct is to refer to modern medicine and psychiatric care, depending on the situation. I believe God works through his creation, and that includes medical science. But let's face it, medicine can be therapeutic, but it isn't redemptive. There is a spiritual dimension at work here. It has a proper voice in the conversation.

Take it to the next level. Some atrocities cannot easily be explained away. This week was the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. The tears streaming down the faces of 90-year old survivors are mute witness to the horrors that went on. Some things are hard to ascribe to human agency alone. As one contemporary theologian said, "...without the Devil, there is no Redeemer. Only by grasping the depth of the Evil One can the full extent of the love of God be known." The forces of evil are real. We cannot just sit back and ignore the activity of Satan in our world.

The other error is to take an unhealthy interest in the paranormal. Ironically today, when we consider ourselves the epitome of reason and rationalism – this unhealthy interest is on the increase. More and more, the movies we see, the music we hear and the books we read put the occult at center stage. It's no longer lurking on the sidelines but it is going mainstream. Not long ago I was at the gym and happened to catch a piece of daytime TV, where a psychic had been invited as a guest on a talk show. She went around the audience giving messages from the dead to their loved ones. And the audience swallowed it hook, line and sinker. As human beings, we seem to be wired for interest in all things spiritual – whether healthy or unhealthy. And as our culture disengages with Christian faith, this unhealthy fascination with the powers of darkness seems to be filling the void.

The biblical view takes seriously the works of Satan. It takes seriously the power of darkness. The name "Satan" means *adversary* or *accuser* (and he lives up to his name). He is also called by other names, including a title Jesus gave him: *The Ruler of this World*. His purpose: to steal, kill and destroy. To undo God's Kingdom, which Jesus set into motion. We dare not ignore it. Nor do we dare dabble in it. Like Robbie in "The Exorcist," we may find ourselves way out of our league. And yet, we need to take this power seriously, if for no other reason than Jesus did.

Well, what can we do about this spiritual battle in which we are caught? Scripture gives us several strategies. And the first is this: while we may recognize the existence of Satan, we do not *put our faith in* him. We *believe in* Jesus, not in Satan. We do not place the center of our faith in the powers of darkness. We recognize it but we do not *trust* in it. You see, as Christians we do not believe in two gods (we are not dualists). There is not a good God and an evil god. Satan is opposite but not equal to God. Scripture persistently proclaims *one* God and he is good. In

baptism, we reject the “forces of evil, the devil and all his empty promises.” But we profess *faith– trust* – in the one true God.

One of my seminary profs, Dr Walter Sundberg, is an expert in early Church history, a time when important Christian doctrines were shaped. He points out that there is no fully developed “satanology” in the Church. The Church has never formed a distinct doctrine (or teaching) around Satan. We have doctrines about Jesus and the Trinity and salvation. The Church has developed specific teachings about the Holy Spirit. But it has never done so about the evil spirit. What you will find, says Sundberg, is a grouping of “loosely formed teachings, characterized by a rich variety of metaphorical expressions.” But although not formalized, there is a common theme: God battles against Satan. This battle is apparent from the very beginning of Genesis and continues through the end of Revelation. And in each conflict, God emerges triumphant. This is good news, because we soon recognize that the evil we fear is not only out there; it’s also in here. We need a Champion to fight on our behalf.

In Christ, we find that Champion. Though our present age is one of stress and even under threat, the Bible states with absolute clarity that, when all is said and done – when the final curtain drops – Satan will be completely and utterly destroyed. Christ will prevail! So ... what to do until that day? First, don’t focus your faith on Satan. Christ and Christ alone is your hope; focus on him. And second, pray.

Some of you are familiar with C. S. Lewis’ book, *Screwtape Letters*. It’s a whimsical book with serious intent, in which Lewis portrays an under-under secretary to the Devil counseling his nephew, a junior tempter called Screwtape, in the art of temptation. At one point Screwtape’s victim, a new Christian, begins to devote himself to prayer. This is alarming news to the senior devil, because while they could play with the victim’s thoughts around the *subject* of prayer, they could do nothing while the Christian was actually *praying* – in direct communication with God. Especially, the senior devil warned, when the Christian gets to the point of praying, “Not my will but thine be done.” Then (from the devil’s perspective) all is lost.

In Scripture, Jesus pointed to *prayer* as the power by which healing and wholeness take place. Once, after giving his disciples power to heal, a man came to Jesus with his demon-possessed son, saying that the disciples were unable to cast out the evil spirit. Jesus responded, “This kind can only come out by prayer.” Before raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus prayed. Before going to the cross, Jesus prayed. If Jesus prayed, then you and I certainly need to pray. Paul and James are among the disciples who later wrote eloquently and urgently about the need to be in prayer. So – that’s the second strategy: *pray*.

First, put your faith in Christ, not in Satan. Second, pray. And third, suit up in the armor of God, in order to withstand the power of the evil one. We read it earlier this morning. Buckle up with truth. Put on your running shoes, always ready to share the Gospel. Use faith as a shield when the Enemy throws his poison darts at you. Protect your head, your mind, with the assurance of salvation. Your only weapon: God’s Word. And through it all, pray, pray, pray – asking the Holy Spirit to help you.

I will close with a true story of an “exorcism” that is rather different from what we often hear from the media. It was in Africa, where I was the campus pastor at our Lutheran Theological Seminary. A young girl had begun moaning in worship and by the time we finished, she had gotten louder. Several of our students attempted an exorcism, shaking her by the shoulders and shouting at the demon to leave. Well, nothing happened except that she grew worse.

Finally her friends came to ask me to drive her to town and help get her to the hospital. So we lifted her and put her into the back seat, her head cradled in a friend’s lap. Her body was stiff as a board. She clearly wasn’t herself.

It was a 20-minute drive to town. Rather than shout at the devil, we decided to talk to Jesus. Because he’s the one we believe in, trust in. We used the medium of Christian songs, spiritual songs that she knew, sung in her mother tongue. They were quiet songs, restful and melodic. They were full of Scripture, singing God’s words of promise and hope and love. By the time we got to town, she was smiling and the light was back in her eyes. As we put her into the care of the nurses, she assured us she would be all right. Jesus had taken over. In fact, she visited me the next day, glowing with health, well-being and joy. You see, when you turn on the light, the darkness goes away. Jesus is that light.

My friends, when you have fears, doubts and anxieties, or are troubled by dark thoughts, take it to the Lord in prayer. Fill your mind with Christian truth – listen to music that glorifies Christ; spend time in God’s word; memorize it. Do as Jesus did when tempted in the wilderness—respond with the words, “It is written,” using God’s own word for your defense. Don’t depend on your own strength; let God do the fighting for you.

In Jesus, Satan meets the Master and is outmatched at every turn. On the cross, Jesus fought the final and ultimate battle against sin, death and the power of the devil. And afterwards, he arose victorious from the grave. As followers of Christ, you and I have nothing to fear. But we are caught up in the battle. So be prepared! Pray. Put on your spiritual armor. Focus your faith on Jesus, your Champion, your Victor. For we fight in a battle that has already been won. Amen.