

‘The Stronger Man’

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We say of First Baptist Church ‘we are a community following Jesus with a heart for the city and beyond’. A community following Jesus. OK, so Who is He? Who is Jesus? As we are discovering the more important form of the question is, ‘Who does Jesus think He is?’ ‘The Strong Man’, He says. Or, more accurately, ‘The Stronger Man’. The person in our midst is the Stronger Man, who comes to invade a strong man’s house. And once He invades the house, He binds the strong man, takes away the strong man’s armour, and begins to plunder the strong man’s house.

What is Jesus talking about? According to Mark, one of the four Gospel writers, Mathew, Mark, Luke and John. According to Mark. No sooner had Jesus come on the scene when weird things begin to happen. Oh, really good things begin to happen! Like people being healed of all kinds of diseases like lepers being cleansed and the blind receiving sight. But weird things – at least on modern and post-modern terms – begin taking place. Jesus would simply show up and demonic powers would cry out “I know who You are...the Holy One of God” (1: 24).

Jesus would simply walk into a space, a synagogue, for instance, and before saying a word, Before doing anything, ‘unclean spirits’, as Mark calls them, would cry out, ‘what do we have to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? (Mark 1:24) On nearly every page of the first – half of the Gospel of Mark, we find Jesus encountering what Mark further call ‘unclean spirits’, agents of the evil-one himself.

I have to confess that I would just as soon skip over texts like the one before us today. But I cannot. For one thing, there are simply too many of them! To skip over them would be to skip over too much of the Gospels’ portrait of Jesus. For another, it turns out that Jesus’ encounter with evil in the form of unclean spirits is fundamental to the Gospels’ portrait of Jesus.

The Gospel writers – especially Mark – would tell us that we will never understand Who Jesus is apart from His love for and trust in the One He calls ‘Father’. So we will never understand Who Jesus is apart from His engagement with, and power over, the One He calls Satan’.

So, what are we 21st century people, living in a sophisticated, world-class city like Vancouver, to make of Mark 3 and other texts like it?

1st century readers of Mark would not be surprised that Jesus would have these weird experiences. The whole ancient world believed in demons and devils. They would have no trouble singing with Martin Luther, 'though this world with devils filled should threaten to un-do us'.

The great German historian Adolf Harnack speaking of the 1st century understanding of reality tells that, "the whole world and the circum-ambient atmosphere were filled with devils; not merely idolatry, but every phase and form of life was ruled by them. They sat on thrones, they hovered around candles. The earth was literally a hell'. (quoted by Berding, Mark, p 33)

1st century persons lived in fear of the demonic. So to a 1st century reader of Mark the weird happenings are not weird. Different than anything they had witnessed before – which we shall see – but not weird.

But how are we in this 'secularized' age – though one has to wonder how secular, given the amount of money now spent on Halloween. How are we to process the stories of Jesus and the demonic?

It seems to me that we have three options:

The first option is to say that such events did not really occur. To say that Mark has simply drawn his portrait of Jesus in terms of people of that day feared the demonic, and since Mark knew that Jesus frees people from fear, Mark (and the other writers of the New Testament) created these stories, hoping thereby to comfort troubled souls.

The second option is to say that these stories of demons and demon activity are but primitive ways of describing broken reality. We in our day, this option suggests – now know better – we now know that the phenomena 1st century people attributed to demons can now be explained by 'natural' causes; by physical, chemical, psychological, neurological factors. This option would argue that Jesus wishing to meet people on their own terms, accommodated Himself to their understanding of reality. If people believed that some of their hurts and disorders were caused by demonic spirits, then Jesus worked on the level of that belief. Instead of trying to change their belief system, their basic world view, Jesus simply entered it. But this option argues, Jesus Himself did not hold such an understanding of life.

The third option is to take the New Testament stories on face value. To say that Mark (and the other Gospel writers) is describing what actually happened. This third option says that although they cannot be described with scientific precision there are such entities as unclean spirits describe. Such spiritual beings are, in the words of New Testament scholar James Dunn, 'particular manifestations of the evil in the world that is hostile to God'. (Demon Possession and Exorcism in the New Testament , pg 216). This

option says, there really is in the universe a spiritual force, a personal spiritual force hostile to God. And just as the living God has spiritual beings called angels to do his bidding, so the enemy of God – Satan – has spiritual beings to do His bidding. This third option says that Jesus never ‘accommodated Himself to anything He regarded as superstition or error’ (Bob Whitaker) Jesus never hesitated to correct what He regarded as an erroneous view of life. This third option says that Jesus acknowledges, that evil spirits exist and that they can and do gain a measure of control in the world and cause all kinds of disorder and destruction. This third option says that Jesus comes for the express purpose of destroying the works of the devil (1 John 3:9).

I submit to you that the third option is the one that finally makes sense of the data. I realise that in taking the interpretation of the Gospel stories one can be dismissed as an extreme literalist or even as foolish. I realize that in taking this interpretation one faces a host of really difficult questions like, how does the idea of the demonic relate to the insights of modern physics and psychology? Do demons still operate in the world and get a hold on people? If they do, how can we discern when that is the case? And if it is the case how can we act?

C.S. Lewis helps us. In his great work ‘Mere Christianity’, Lewis makes the observation that the devil ‘always sends errors into the world in pairs – pairs of opposites. And he always encourages us to spend a lot of time thinking which is worse. You see why, of course? He relies on your extra dislike of the one error to draw you gradually into the opposite one’ (160).

Regarding the demonic the pair of opposite errors is, on the one hand, becoming so interested in the demonic we think we see a demon under every bush; and on the other hand ignoring and discounting this dimension of reality all together. Canadian psychologist John White put it so well in his book ‘The Fight’. ‘The devil welcomes a Hume or a Faust with equal zest. He is equally delighted by an atheist, a liberal theologian or a witch. And it may be added he feels as happy with a Christian mind pre-occupied with demons all day long as he is with a Christian mind who never gives them a thought’ (77-78)

Texts like Mark 3 force upon us the whole matter of ‘world-view’. Texts like Mark 3 make us evaluate again our ‘vision of reality’. James Sire, for years the editor of InterVarsity Press, defines worldview as ‘a set of presuppositions (or assumptions) which we hold (consciously or sub-consciously) about the make up of the world. (The Universe Next Door, 18) Whether we can articulate the presupposition or assumption is not the point: the point is every individual and every culture has these assumptions.

N.T. Wright calls worldviews ‘the lenses’ through which a people, a society looks at their world. ‘The grid upon which are plotted the multiple experiences of life’. (Jesus and Victory, 138)

The worldview that dominates our city – and most cities of the world – is what we might call a ‘secular’ worldview. The ‘secular’ worldview is essentially two-dimensional:

- 1) the human self
- 2) the physical universe

Everything, it is thought can be understood, explained, by these two dimensions - the human self and the physical universe. Everything that happens has its causes in one or both of the dimensions: in the human self and/ or in the physical universe.

The Biblical worldview, however, is four dimensional. There are the two easily recognised dimensions;

- 1.) the human self
- 2.) the physical universe

But there are also

- 3.) the Living God AND
- 4.) unseen, created 'spiritual' beings and powers.

Everything has to be understood, explained, accounted for multi-dimensionally. The Biblical authors tell us that we are not being realistic about life unless and until we factor in all four dimensions of reality. The Biblical authors would tell us 'secularized' people, that for all or hard-nosed 'realism' we are not being realistic enough! When trying to understand what is happening in our lives or in our cities or in our world, we have to be taken in:

- 1) the dimension of the human self,
- 2) and the dimension of the physical universe,
- 3) and the dimension of the Living God,
- 4) and the dimension of unseen, created, 'spiritual' beings and powers.

Biblical realism. Four dimensional. If we want to understand life in the universe, on the planet, in the city, we have to factor in the stories of Jesus' encounter with evil spirits.

Again C.S. Lewis helps; this time in his book "Screwtape Letters". He writes: "It seems to me" this four-dimensional worldview... to explain a good many facts. It agrees with the plain sense of Scripture, the tradition of Christendom, and the beliefs of most people at the most time. And it conflicts with nothing that any of the sciences has shown to be true." (vii)

What are we to make of texts like Mark 3? We are to take them at face value. We are to let them challenge and shape our worldview, so that we are fully realistic.

Now, the important question is what does Jesus make of all that was happening when He simply showed up? This brings us to His first parable, the parable recorded in Mark 3.

Mark tells us that Jesus' 'own' apparently referring to his close relatives – were quite concerned about Him. Having heard reports of what was happening – especially about Jesus' encounter with unclean spirits. Some concluded He was going mad 'He has lost his senses' they say, the professional theologians, the scribes of the Pharisees were also

concerned. ‘He is possessed by Beelzebub’, they say. ‘He casts out demons by the ruler of the demons’ (3:22), they say.

The scribes had no trouble accepting the factuality of Jesus’ exorcism; they questioned the source of Jesus’ power. They concluded that Jesus was in cahoots with Satan himself! Jesus points out the logical inconsistency of their analysis. ‘How can Satan cast out Satan? If a Kingdom is divided against itself, that Kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. If Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand but is finished.’ (3:23-26)

Jesus then warns the scribes to be very careful how they analyze Jesus’ deeds. To attribute the work of Jesus to the demonic can lead to the unpardonable sin.

Then Jesus gives His own analysis of what is going on. In His first parable. Mar 3, vs 27 “No one can enter the strong man’s house and plunder his property unless he first binds the strong man, and then he will plunder his house.”

Luke records a fuller telling of the parable. Luke 11, vs 21-22. “When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own homestead, his possession are undisturbed; but then someone stronger than he attacks him and re-empower him, he takes away from him all his armour on which he had relied, and distribute his plunder.”

In this parable Jesus is revealing His worldview. He is revealing His own understanding of the fallen human condition and is revealing His own understanding of His role in the world.”

According to Jesus the world is a ‘house under siege’. It is occupied by a strong enemy. Beelzebub, one of the names Scripture gives to Satan, means ‘lord of the house’.

In His parable Jesus is offering what the rest of Scripture teaches. At some point in time, before God created the world, one of the angelic beings whom God made rebelled. Why? All we are told is that this being, created to service God and Gods’ purposes, did not want to accept God’s lordship over his own existence. So he declared independence and began an angelic revolution. That decision brought evil into existence. God created no evil; nothing God made was originally evil. This being – Satan, devil, and accuser – became evil as a result of his decision to be independence of God.

Since that time, this personal evil has been committed to God thwarting Gods’ purposes in the world. He has worked so hard and gained such influences that the apostle John can say “the whole world lies in the power of the evil one’. (1John 5:19) Behind the movements of human history, behind the powerful human structures that oppress people, lies the operation of what the apostle Paul calls ‘principalities and powers’, or ‘powers and dominions, rulers and authorities’, a whole host of demonic agents carrying out Satan’s designs.

According to Jesus' parable, these demonic forces have infiltrated our existence and in some way hold humanity hostage

More than that God's enemy seeks to destroy humanity. Not because he hates us but because he hates God. He wants to destroy God. But since he cannot get at God, he goes after what God has made. He especially goes after human beings, creatures made in God's image. Since he cannot get at God – he goes after not God's equal – he goes after what is closest to God's heart. He goes after humans.

When the Mafia cannot gain control over a businessman, they go after the man's family; they kidnap his children. The world is under siege by a strong man.

In His first parable Jesus reveals what he has come to do. He has come to 'plunder' the strong man's house. He has come to set the hostages free.

As Benjamin Britton sings in his Christmas Anthem 'the little babe so few days old, has come to rattle Satan's hold'. All hell doth at his presence quake though he himself for cold do shake; for in this weak unarmed wise the gates of hell he will surprise'.

So, for example, in the 9th chapter of his Gospel, Mark tells us of a boy with symptoms akin to epilepsy being brought to Jesus. Jesus sees through those symptoms to the presence of evil. And without the magical spells and elaborate incantations of other exorcists, Jesus simply speaks a word – "you deaf and dumb spirit, I command you; come out of him and do not enter him again". (9:25)

In the 5th chapter of his Gospel, Mark tells us about a man with a violent, uncontrollable personality. Mark says of the man: "No one was able to bind him any more, even with a chain" – he would tear the chains apart. Jesus sees through the abnormal behaviour to the presence of not one but a legion of spirits. And again, without any force, simply spoke 'Come out of the man, you unclean spirit'. (5:8)

Now we must be careful here. Jesus does not attribute all sickness, or all personality disorders or violence to the demonic. Most illness and most disorder is due to the brokenness of creation and to the sin of humanity. Jesus comes into all the wreckage to make us whole again. Sometimes we need forgiveness. Sometimes we need physical healing. Sometimes we need psychological healing. And sometimes we need to be delivered from the work of Jesus' enemy.

Jesus is the Stronger Man who comes to plunder the strong man's house. He comes to set the captives free.

He does it by binding the strong man. Not by destroying him. Not yet. But by binding him.

This binding Jesus begins to do in the wilderness when Satan comes to test Him. Three times the enemy tries to deflect Jesus from His mission. Three times Jesus stands. Jesus

wins all three rounds. And emerges from the wilderness with His Gospel “the time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God has come near”. (Mark 1:15)

But the real ‘binding’ takes place at the cross. As Jesus is being arrested He says to Judas and the soldiers: ‘When I was with you day after day in the Temple, you did not lay hands on Me. But this is your hour and the power of darkness “. (Luke 22:53)

Jesus is now moving into the final confrontation. The soldiers take Him away and He does not resist. This is being stronger than the strong man? During the mockery of a trial He does not defend Himself. This is being the stronger man? While being beaten and spat on He does not retaliate. This is being the stronger man? He is forced to carry His own cross up the hill to Golgotha. This is the way to bind evil?

The forces of evil, I am sure, were delighted with Jesus’ behaviour. The evil-one’s henchmen had to be rejoicing. “So, Jesus of Nazareth .. You have come to destroy us have You? You won in the desert. But now You will be defeated.” Finally Satan was going to get at God...as God Himself is in the person of Jesus.

And then Jesus dies. And more ‘strange’ things begin to happen. The curtain in the Temple is torn in two. The earth begins to shake. The rocks split and graves were opened. Graves were opened? As Jesus lets evil take Him down? Graves were opened? Yes, because in the moment Jesus dies, death lost its grip: Jesus’ death is the death of death. As a mentor of mine once said ‘When death stung Jesus it stung itself to death.’ Death had to let its captives go.

Which means Jesus had just robbed the strong man of his greatest weapon: the fear of death. The strong man could no longer hold the hostages with the threat of death. Death is no longer the boogeyman it once was. Jesus has defeated death. And as the writer of the book of Hebrews puts it (Hebrews 2:14-15): through death Jesus ‘rendered powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil. The at He , Jesus, ‘might deliver those who through the fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives’. Just before Jesus dies the powers of evil were rejoicing! ‘Finally, we got Him and with Him all He has created’. But in the moment He dies the rejoicing stopped. Evil was hit with the realization that Jesus had just won the victory!

This is what Mel Gibson tried to show in his movie “The Passion of the Christ’. Remember that snake figure sneaking around at different times in Jesus’ life? He is moving in the background as Jesus stands before Caiaphas and Anas, the high priests. He is moving in the background as Jesus stands before Pilate. And he is slithering in the background as Jesus is dying on the cross.

But remember what happens in the moment Jesus dies? The snake – the evil one – screams out in desperation, and whirls down, down, down. Why? In the moment Jesus died He overcame the evil one. The stronger man taking what appeared to be in a weak way had bound the strong man.

And on Easter morning The Stronger Man came out of the tomb and continues to plunder the strong man's house. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world turns out to be the Lion who takes down the ruler of evil.

So what are the implications for us at this time in history in this place?

First, the persona implication. We need not fear the evil one in his desire to destroy. We can now say to him, 'Jesus has bound you. You have no authority in my life. Be gone.' In those times when we sense we are being hassled, or tormented, or attacked by evil, we can take our stand in Jesus; and in His name say "you leave me and my family alone". I had to do that a number of times this past week as I struggled to write this sermon. A number of times I just wanted to give up and preach an easier text. A number of times I put my pencil down, and said, 'You leave me alone, I belong to Jesus. I am going to tell the truth. You may be strong but someone stronger has bound you. Back off!

And second, the social implication, Jesus has given His disciples His authority over the demonic. Mark, Matthew, Luke all emphasise the fact (Mark 6:1, Matthew 10:1, Luke 9:1) so when the 70 disciples returned from the short-term mission and when Jesus had sent them, they tell Jesus with joy 'Lord, even demons are subject to us in Your name.' In Your Name there is authority and power in Jesus' Name.

So we read in the books of acts stories of how the church was used to set captives free. In the city of Philippi, for example, the apostle Paul and Luke being hassled by a certain slave girl. She had a 'spirit of divination', as Luke calls it, and was bringing her masters quite a fortune by storytelling. She kept following Paul and Luke crying out, 'These men are bond slaves of the Most High God, who are proclaiming the way of salvation'. (Acts 16:17) She kept it up for days. Finally Paul had enough. He turns around and says, not to the girl, but to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus that you come out of her" (16:18) And it did. And the girl was free. And the Gospel went forth in power.

The church never need cower in the face of evil. Indeed, the church can dare to move into Satan's strongholds, and in Jesus' Name announce the release of hostages. "I will build my church, says Jesus, "and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Most people have taken this to mean that as Jesus builds His church in the world, hell will try to destroy it, but will not succeed. This is true. The powers of hell will try and will not succeed. But what Jesus is saying is that He will build His church and the church will move into hells' strongholds and hell will not prevail.

Which is why when the Gospel is announced in a city the city begins to change. Not only because individuals begin to change. But because the powers of darkness and deceit, the forces of oppression and exploitation are moved.

One of my favourite contemporary Christian songs is the one by Newsboys entitled "He Reigns".

It's the song of the redeemed

Rising from the African plain
It's the song of the forgiven
Drowning out the Amazon rain
The song of Asian believers
Filled with God's holy fire
It's every tribe, every tongue, every nation
A love song born of a grateful choir

It's all God's children singing
Glory, glory, hallelujah
He reigns, He reigns
It's all God's children singing
Glory, glory, hallelujah
He reigns, He reigns

Then this line

And all the powers of darkness
Tremble at what they've just heard

That happens every time we worship in the name of Jesus. The powers of darkness tremble for they once again realize that Jesus the Stronger Man has bound them.

You spirits behind pornography, as strong as you are, Jesus is stronger, and He binds you. You must let the captives go free. You spirits behind human trafficking, Jesus is stronger than you and He binds you. You must let the captives go free. You spirits behind drug abuse, as strong as you are, Jesus is stronger, and He binds you. You must let the captives go free. You spirits behind gang warfare in this city Jesus is stronger, and He binds you. You must let the captives go free. You spirits causing confusion, Jesus is stronger, and He binds you. You must let the captives go free.

Though this world with devils filled
Should threaten to undo us
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us
The prince of darkness grins,
We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
For lo! His doom is sure;
One little word shall fell him"

This little word is the name Jesus.