

Epiphany 4

Mark 1:21-28

January 28, 2024 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

The Day the Devil Went to Church

He tried to stop God's Word
God's Word stopped him

It was a Sabbath day they would never forget. Sabbath means rest. Jews were not supposed to work on the 7th day of each week, Saturday. Certainly, God was concerned about rest for their bodies, but he especially wanted them to get rest for their souls. On the Sabbath, Jews would go to the synagogue (church). They would pray together, listen to assigned readings from the Old Testament and sing some Psalms. Not every synagogue had a trained rabbi and so a layman would lead them in their worship. If a rabbi was visiting, he was invited to address the people, commenting on one of the Scripture lessons, just like we have sermons.

When Jesus and his disciples were in Capernaum on the Sabbath day, they went to the synagogue. Jesus was invited to preach. Mark tells us (:22), "**The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.**" Typically, Jewish teachers simply shared what different rabbis taught about trivial things, like how many steps you could take on the Sabbath before it was considered work, or exactly at what moment the Sabbath began, or what kind of food was permitted or forbidden. A typical teacher would say things like, "This rabbi says this, but that rabbi says that," or, "Well, maybe," etc. Jesus was clear and concise. He spoke with authority. He called sin a sin. He pointed out that all were sinners and needed a Savior. He also pointed to the promise of a Savior who would take sin away. The people were impressed. This also happened to be the day when the devil went to church. Mark tells us (:23), "**Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out.**" He hated the idea that people would believe what Jesus was teaching about salvation. He made sure to interrupt Jesus. He tried to stop God's Word from being proclaimed. In the end, Jesus stopped him.

He tried to stop God's Word

God created the world along with all the angels who were perfect. However, for some reason, a high-ranking angel was not happy with perfection. He rebelled against God. The Bible calls him Satan, which means enemy, or Devil, which means liar. Along with him, many other angels rebelled against God. We usually refer to them as demons. The Devil and

his demons know that they are going to suffer forever in a very real hell. Their only desire is to get humans to suffer along with them in hell. They do anything they can to keep people away from Jesus. They are glad that there are so many distractions from sports and TV and computer things that people say they are too busy to spend time with God's Word by going to church or reading devotions. They entice people with alluring temptations so that people grab on to a sin and never let go, like grabbing a DC wire. When they are clutching on to a sin, they are not able to receive the salvation Jesus already won for them. Every time you give in to a temptation and do or say or think something you should not, you weaken your faith. Sometimes, demons even take control of someone's body. We call that "demon possession." There doesn't seem to be much demon possession in our country. Most likely, that's because the Devil already has so many people under his control.

Last December, the National Railroad Museum in Ashwaubenon, near Green Bay, had an event where different groups sponsored a Christmas tree. One of the trees was sponsored by "The Satanic Temple of Wisconsin." The tree had red lights and red beads as well as upside-down pentagrams (a Satanic symbol) and other ornaments that said, "Hail Santa," and "Hail Satan." Not to be outdone, Illinois, Iowa, and Michigan all had Satanic displays at their state capitals. There are bumper stickers that say, "Satan loves you." That's a lie. The Devil only wants you to be miserable here and eternally.

The Devil and his demons are real and they are your enemy who want you to suffer forever. Not only did the devil go to church 2000 years ago in Capernaum, he also came to church today to try to stop you from tuning in to God's Word. Even as I speak, the Devil is trying to get you into his cross-hairs to take you down. It is not surprising that the first miracle of Jesus that St. Mark mentions is an exorcism, casting out a devil. Jesus was teaching the objective truth about forgiveness and eternal life in heaven. The demon who took control of one poor fellow's body could not stand hearing that so he interrupted Jesus and tried to stop God's Word.

We can give thanks that we do not suffer from demon possession like that man in Capernaum. But, the work of evil is not limited to demons who can possess and convulse you. All sorts of "spirits" can mess you up spiritually. The spirit of greed has controlled you, so has the spirit of lust at times. The spirit of hate, disrespect, and arrogance can erupt in just a second. The spirits of laziness, complaining, bad-mouthing are around

most work-places and schools. The spirits of jealousy and selfishness are in most homes. Such spirits have created hostility where previously stood friendship, rage where there was peace, hurt where there was none, wounds that don't heal, memories you don't want. Such spirits do not ask your permission to poke their gnarly fingers into your mind and mix up your thinking. The spirits do not ask permission because they are stronger than you. That guy in the synagogue did not ask for a demon to possess him. He did not want it, but the spirit was stronger than him.

Evil spirits are stronger than we are. Every time we sin, it's proof that the demons are stronger than we are. Once the Devil ensnares you in a sin, then he takes out his other weapon of accusation. He constantly shouts in your ear, not whispes, shouts that you dare not lift your head and expect anything good from God because your shame is too great, your pride is too high, your life is too low; your guilt is too much, your sins are too many. He wants to make sure you never hear about Jesus, or if you have heard about him, that you forget about Jesus. Still today, just as in Capernaum, the Devil tries to stop God's Word from connecting with your heart.

God's Word stopped him

How creepy it was for those people in the synagogue to hear a voice coming from the man that was not his own (:24), **“What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!”** What he said was true, but Jesus did not want the endorsement of an evil spirit. Jesus did not argue or debate or even explain anything. He simply said (:25), **“Be quiet! Come out of him!”** and the demon had no choice. He had to leave the man, but he did his best to show his anger as he shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. [Aaaahhhh!] Jesus had control over the demons, but he did not come to earth to prove that. He came to earth to set you free from their control.

Time and again the Bible records Jesus coming face to face with spirits, demons, and devils. And every time, Jesus won. They taunted him, tested him, and talked back to him. Jesus expelled them. They gathered a legion and tried to outnumber him. Jesus threw them into a herd of pigs and got rid of them. The Devil himself dedicated a month and half to tempting him, starving him, bribing him. Jesus simply said, “No.” The Devil spent three years putting together his dream team of church and political leaders. He got Judas, Peter, and Pilate all turned against him. When Jesus was finally pinned to a piece of wood, pierced in his pale side, and put

inside a grave, it looked like evil won. The Devil was thrilled – until the angel rolled the stone away and Jesus was not there. He was alive. He was stronger than any demon, stronger than death. He proved that you can trust him. He proved that your sins are forgiven and your guilt is gone. He proved that there is physical life after death for you.

Jesus cast out the demon with his word – no incantations, no magic potion, no tricks. Just his Word. God's Word has the power to create the world out of nothing, to raise the dead, and to cast out demons. We need to dedicate and rededicate ourselves to spending quality and quantity time with God's Word. I've noticed a misconception many have about how the Lord connects with you. Jesus can certainly come to you anyway he wants – through a message written on a wall or spoken by a donkey. But he has only promised to come to you through his Word. Not even through prayer. If you do not get to church, or read your Bible, or devotions, or take communion, but you pray every day, you are spiritually malnourished and wasting away. Prayer is powerful, but it is an arrow from us to God. If we want power from God to us, we have to plug into the gospel, the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ alone.

God's Word is the only place in the world where can you find a message to encourage you each day, to resist temptation, to relieve your guilty conscience, to calm your fears, to give you hope of eternal happiness, to remind you of God's love, to know you are not alone in our battle against the Devil. When some demon assaults you and tries to get you to take your eyes off of Jesus, turn to God's Word. Open your Bible. Read some devotion. Call a Christian friend. You don't even have to tell him that you are struggling with a temptation. Just a friendly voice will help. Read or sing a hymn or listen to some good Christian music. Please, for the sake of your immortal soul, do not just shrug your shoulders and think, “I don't need to be concerned about the devil or his temptations. I believe in God.” So do the demons, but they aren't going to heaven and they want you with them. There was a day when the devil went to church in Capernaum, but Jesus stopped him. He came to church today too, but God's Word has stopped him so that you are blessed. Stay focused on God's Word and be saved. Amen.