

Mark 1:21-28 Then they went into Capernaum. On the next Sabbath day, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. ²²They were amazed at his teaching, because he was teaching them as one who has authority and not as the experts in the law. ²³Just then there was a man with an unclean spirit in their synagogue. It cried out, ²⁴“What do we have to do with you, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!”

²⁵Jesus rebuked the spirit, saying, “Be quiet! Come out of him!”

²⁶The unclean spirit threw the man into convulsions, and after crying out with a loud voice, it came out of him. ²⁷Everyone was so amazed that they began to discuss this with each other. They said, “What is this? A new teaching with authority! He even commands the unclean spirits, and they obey him!” ²⁸News about him spread quickly through all the region of Galilee.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, dear brothers and sisters in Christ. A few years ago I was conducting a funeral at a different WELS church, which will remain anonymous, when all of a sudden, in the middle of the reading from the book of Revelation, “These in white robes, who are they...” I heard what sounded like a man snarling very intensely as if he were very upset. I looked up to see a man about half way back convulsing back and forth, almost hitting his head on the pew in front of him. And the first thing that popped into my head as I was reading from the book of Revelation about Jesus’ victory, was that this man was being possessed. The people around him, his wife and fellow members, were all a-gasp and panicking more with each snarl and convulsion, unsure of what was going on.

It turns out the man had been enjoying a cheek-full of chewing tobacco and fell asleep. And while he was sleeping he swallowed his tobacco and began to choke. Once those around him figured it out, they were able to help him and all was good...well, until you saw his wife’s face change from panic to being very, very, upset. Hopefully he learned his lesson!

It’s not something you expect to happen in church — a person chewing tobacco, yes, but even more than that, a person choking and almost dying. It was such a shock, such a commotion, an unexpected disturbance to what was going on that I don’t think I’ll ever forget it. And not just the man who was choking, but the gasps, the screams, the panic, from the people around him.

That must have been the scene behind verse 23 — **Just then there was a man with an unclean spirit in their synagogue.** It was a shock,

something unexpected. In the middle of Jesus’ teaching, someone speaking so rudely, so out of turn. People must have been wondering, “What is this guy doing? What is he talking about? Why is he saying such things about this teacher?” They must have been confused. Nothing Jesus was saying or teaching would have lead any of them to believe he had come to destroy them, and yet here this man was saying such bizarre things. And then, after a quick rebuke from Jesus, it got more bizarre — the man was thrown into conclusions and cried out in a loud voice. And then it was over.

Like my experience at that funeral, this incident probably stuck with those people for a long time. Every time they entered the synagogue, they must have thought about that *one* time, that *one* man was possessed *right* here. And they were left with a powerful lesson, too. This happened in the synagogue. The devil was at work in God’s house.

Perhaps that’s the most shocking part of this account — when and where it happened. In the middle of a worship service, in the middle a scripture lesson, taught by the Son of God, Satan was there to undermine it all. And why not? Why wouldn’t he be there? Where else would he be in his work to hinder and hurt the message of the gospel than at the source? Here we see him confessing the truth about Jesus being the Son of God, but with evil intent, to turn the people against Jesus, with hate-filled lies.

On the one hand that evil spirit was there to destroy the work of Jesus, but on the other hand, how foolish it was. It went toe to toe with Jesus and lost without putting up any kind of a fight, and presumably, not winning any of the people in the synagogue over. There was no return argument from Jesus, only a command to be quiet and go away. And he did. With a defiant shriek it was over.

Why doesn’t he do the same today? Well, he’s smart. It’s been said that the devil’s greatest trick is convincing the world he doesn’t exist. Instead of making a big ugly fuss in the middle of a worship service, which would easily be pointed out as Satan’s work and evil on he spot, he’s content to let sinners run with ideas like, “I’ve heard this all before, I don’t need to listen, I don’t need to come. This is boring, it’s not speaking to me in my life. I’ve got better things to do.” If these thoughts are not the work of the devil, I don’t know what is. And they’re much more effective in driving people away from Jesus than that evil spirit who caused such a commotion.

And if Satan hasn’t succeeded in convincing us that he doesn’t exist, he has at least convinced that some of the evil around us isn’t so evil. The

sinful thoughts we begin to entertain and toy with which soon become second nature. Things we know we shouldn't say, soon we say without a second thought. Things we shouldn't watch, soon we watch without batting an eye. Things we know we shouldn't do, soon we do them without blushing. We know Satan exists and the evil he's constantly trying to work, but our sinful thoughts, words, and actions make one wonder, do we believe the danger? Do we understand the risk? Do we recognize the consequences, that for our sins, from the greatest to the least, the ones we know and the ones we're ignorant of, we deserve to be cast with Satan, into the fires of hell forever?

Jesus recognized exactly what it was standing in opposition to him and the danger it posed to the people gathered there. It was an evil Spirit, a messenger of Satan. The Good Shepherd standing among his sheep, took care of it quickly and efficiently, and with authority. **“Be quiet! Come out of him!”** And that was it. As quickly as it had started, it was over.

That's the power of our Savior over the devil's work. He didn't play with it. He didn't toy with it. He didn't give it a second thought. He saw it for what it was, and did away with it before it could do any harm. The tool he used, the weapon he wielded was his words, the words of God. The demon had no choice, no power to do anything but heed them. With a defiant, pathetic shriek, it left.

The same tool and weapon against the devil is at our disposal too. Which words are they? The gospel. The message of Jesus as our Savior. When the devil comes and threatens our safety, accuses us of too many sins, tempts us to put our trust in ourselves or worldly things, or by some evil event shocks us to our core to make us doubt, we have the words of our God, the news of our Savior to beat the devil back, to make him run raving mad back to his prison cell.

So you think you can threaten me? Jesus proved to what lengths he will go to keep me safe — He crushed your head by dying on the cross. So you think you can accuse me of sin and I'm supposed to lose my faith? Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world, once and for all, for me. You accusing me of sin only reminds me of how much I need Jesus, and how much he did for me. You think you can dangle earthly treasures and pleasures in front of me and I'll forget the eternal treasures Jesus has waiting for me? **Seek first his kingdom and all these things will be given you as well.** You think you can use the trouble of this world, complete with all its death and decay, the fact that every thing seems to be declining and will one day be gone, to rob me of my faith? **“Jesus said,**

In this world you will have trouble, but take heart, for I have overcome the world.”

The words of our God, the message of the gospel, the good news of Jesus is all we need to send the devil packing on his way with all his guilt inducing accusations and sin provoking temptations.

But first we need to recognize it, as Jesus did. Thankfully the tool to recognize it is the same to combat it. God's Word. Which makes what we do here anything but boring or irrelevant. Sure this Sunday may not be the day the devil decides to attack you, but what if it's next Sunday? What if it's tomorrow, or next week or next year? Who knows how the devil will try to use the events of your future against you? What I *do* know is if you're not prepared, if you're not ready, if God's Words are too distant, you won't know what hit you.

That's why it's true, we *have* heard it all before. And thank God. For in that day of trouble, in that time of need, in the midst of tragedy and turmoil, heartbreak and loss with Satan shrieking in your ear, you won't be wondering, “What was that I heard before?”

You'll hear that familiar voice of your Savior: For you I came into this world to live perfectly in your place, because I knew how impossible it would be for you. For you I took my perfect life and laid it down, taking up the sins of the world, including yours, to the cross. There I paid the price in full. For you I rose again guaranteeing that you too will rise, no matter what you thought, what you said, what you did, it's all yours by the gift of faith my Spirit put in your heart.

And along with that faith is a new person who when fed regularly the Word and Sacrament not only recognizes more quickly Satan's attacks, but has the means to thwart them.

How long had that evil spirit been in God's house? What a blessing that Jesus was there to recognize it and cast it out. What evil is in your life that you have failed to recognize? What sin have you grown comfortable with? May we recognize the danger, so that we can appreciate even more our Savior, to cast out that sin, that sin too for which he lived and died and rose again.

As children of God trusting in our Savior's forgiveness, let us recognize that we are at the top of Satan's list of people he would love to see fall. If he is bold enough to lurk in God's house, he's working in our own houses, in our lives, in our relationships, everywhere.

I say this not so that we are afraid, but so that we are ready — ready to recognize sin in our lives for what it is; ready to hear God’s word, even, and especially when we’ve heard it before; ready to unleash the power of our God through the weapon *of* his Word, to send the devil packing back to hell with a shriek, and continue our journey to heaven, a journey filled with unending praise and thanks, now and forever. Amen!