

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
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A Clash of Kingdoms

Luke 4:31-44

In last Sunday's text, Jesus laid out his agenda. "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (4:18-19). And in today's text, Jesus begins implementing that agenda. He starts to practice what he's preaching. It's one thing for him to announce that the Spirit of the Lord is on him. Now we get to see what it looks like to have the Spirit on him, at ground level, in the sufferings and struggles of people's lives.

First up is a confrontation with a demon. The demon recognizes Jesus as a threat. In fact, more than just a threat. Jesus is the one sent from God, which means that the demon is up against more than just human strength and will. This is a clash with the power of God, the power that liberates the captives, including those who are in bondage to evil spirits. "Have you come to destroy us?" asks the demon. I'm guessing the demon already knows the answer to that question. And soon the answer is evident for all to see. After putting up a fight, the demon departs, and the man is made whole.

Soon, thanks to social media, the whole town has heard. A couple of people even posted videos of the exorcism. The next day, Capernaum's local paper carried the story on the front page. Once word had spread, it was hard for Jesus to control the narrative. He was worried that people might hear about the episode and treat it as just another marvel performed by a traveling wonder-worker who was here one day and gone the next.

But in fact there were lots of folks in Capernaum, especially in the religious community, who already saw something different in Jesus. His claim that the Spirit of the Lord was on him was no empty boast. When Jesus preached and taught, there was an authority present, a power that was way more than just personal charisma or mastery of the subject matter. It wasn't just about Jesus. It was about God present in Jesus, doing the kinds of things that broke the power of evil and ushered in the age of deliverance. The demons themselves already see what many others will, with time, come to see, namely, that Jesus is the Savior sent from God.

Of course none of this is news to the devil, who has already lost his initial battle with Jesus. Recall that prior to launching his public ministry, Jesus spent forty days in combat with the devil. Before he preached a single sermon, cast out a single demon, healed a single sick person, or fed a single hungry person, Jesus went through trial and testing. But the same Spirit that was upon him in his ministry was in him during his temptation, and Jesus came out of the wilderness victorious. So by the time Jesus starts announcing and implementing God's kingdom agenda, he already knows that he's stepping onto the field of battle.

No surprise, then, that in the rest of our text the scene of conflict shifts from the synagogue to Peter's house. In this case, Peter's mother-in-law is suffering from a fever, possibly rooted in what we would understand as an infection. But notice how Luke describes her

illness using terminology that borders on possession. Luke says that she was oppressed, ruled, or held captive by the fever. Jesus rebukes the fever, in the same way that he had rebuked the demon. The fever releases her. She's one of the prisoners to whom Jesus proclaims freedom.

That evening, and on into the night, other captives are brought to Jesus. Some are healed by his touch, and others by the power of his word. And once again the defeated demons confess the truth about Jesus. So this chapter that began with the devil challenging Jesus, "If you are the Son of God. . .," ends with the evil spirits shouting, "You are the Son of God!" There's no mistaking who the winner is in this clash of kingdoms.

This means that when you confess Jesus as your Savior, attaching yourself to him and following him in your life, you're aligning yourself with the winning side in the struggle with evil in the world. Becoming a Christian isn't a way of just benignly associating yourself with Jesus and calling upon his name from time to time, as needed. No, becoming a Christian means stepping into the midst of spiritual conflict. Being a disciple means that where Jesus is, there you are as well. Where Jesus goes, there you go as well. And the opening scenes in Jesus' public ministry make it clear that Jesus enters fully into the spiritual warfare of this present world.

Remember that God's will and purpose, revealed in Jesus, isn't warmly and gratefully received by the world that's passing away. We've already seen plenty of indications of this so far in Luke's Gospel. When Joseph and Mary presented Jesus in the Temple, Simeon spoke about how this child would meet resistance and create division. When John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus, he preached about how Jesus would separate the repentant from the unrepentant. When Jesus exited the waters of baptism, he entered the wilderness of temptation, where he did battle with the devil. When Jesus preached his first sermon in his hometown synagogue, many of the people rejected his message and drove him out of town. And now, as Jesus releases the good news of God into the lives of the poor and the oppressed, evil spirits rise up and fight back. Clearly, the arrival of God's reign provokes spiritual conflict.

No wonder the Scriptures remind us that there are more actors in the drama of redemption than just God and ourselves. There's more than just human agency in play. "Finally," says the writer of Ephesians, "be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (6:10-12). So there's more going on than we often realize. Bigger things are at work. Forces of darkness that we describe with various terminology—demons, spirits, powers.

Now this doesn't mean that everything bad and destructive in our lives is the result of evil spirits. Nor does it mean that when we're behaving unrighteously, there's a simple explanation: "The devil made me do it." We're still responsible for our actions. And we're still responsible for taking into account the findings of science, medicine, psychology, sociology, and other forms of research and knowledge. Many factors, such as physical disease, mental illness, behavior patterns, family history, or unresolved conflict, can shape our circumstances and our conduct. But at the same time, from a Christian perspective, we still acknowledge that these categories and methods don't explain everything. We still affirm that there's more to reality than just what we can see and measure and analyze.

Sometimes this spiritual battle with evil may be at a personal, individual level. Captivity to drugs. Imprisonment to alcohol. Addiction to pornography. Bondage to food. Obsession

with self-image. Enslavement to career. Oppressed by guilt. Or perhaps a spirit of greed. A spirit of rage. A spirit of pride. A spirit of divisiveness. A spirit of prejudice. A spirit of hatred. A spirit of violence. Evil spirits of various kinds that try to seize you and lead you down the path to destruction.

At other times, dark spiritual powers may operate at an institutional level. Evil can possess us, not just personally, but organizationally. It can work its way into politics, business, education, and religion. The systems and structures of society, the groups in which gather, the institutions by which we govern ourselves, can become the territory where forces of death and destruction take hold and work against the good of people and the purposes of God.

NPR journalist Scott Simon tells about interviewing Romeo Dallaire, who commanded U. N. peacekeeping forces in 1993 and 1994. During that time, more than 800,000 Tutsi Rwandans were slaughtered over three months. According to Simon,

Dallaire said that what happened made him believe in evil, and even a force he called the devil. "I've negotiated with him," he told us, "shaken his hand. Yes. There is no doubt in my mind . . . and the expression of evil to me is through the devil and the devil at work and possessing human beings and turning them into machines of destruction. . . . And one of the evenings in my office, I was looking out the window and my senses felt that something was there with me that shifted me. I think that evil and good are playing themselves out and God is monitoring and looking at how we respond to it."¹

Our own response to the presence of personal and corporate evil in the world has to be tied to the ongoing ministry of Jesus, and the power at work in him. Human techniques and knowledge aren't enough. Ultimately, only the power of the Holy Spirit can overcome the power of evil spirits. So when we follow the Scripture's admonition to resist the devil, who "prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Pet. 5:8), our resistance must have its source in the Lord, who has already triumphed over darkness and death. When we go forth in his name, his power makes all the difference.

David Fitch tells about how the prayers of one church vanquished Satan's grip on a neighborhood:

In 2010 a group of eight people from two churches felt called to the Detroit Boulevard neighborhood of Sacramento. It was known as one of the most notorious crime-ridden neighborhoods in all of Sacramento. Each house in that neighborhood was a place of danger. Nonetheless this group of eight decided to walk through the neighborhood praying over each home and praying for the presence of Christ to reign over violence, addiction, and satanic oppression. They began walking through the neighborhood, praying over each home and rebuking the demonic strongholds of addiction and violence.

One of the eight, former Sacramento police officer and gang detective Michael Xiong, reported that "each time we prayed over the houses, we felt the weight of oppression becoming lighter." A woman from one of the houses confronted them. When she discovered they were praying for the community, she asked for healing, and God healed her.

The group soon physically moved into the neighborhood and started what they called Detroit Life Church. A couple years later a local newspaper, the *Sacramento Bee*, reported that there were no homicides, robberies, or sex crimes, and only one assault in Detroit Boulevard between 2013 and 2014. Detroit Boulevard had been transformed by a small group of people who began their ministry in the neighborhood by praying around houses, streets, and parks for the power of Satan to be vanquished. Kingdom prayer in body is what it means to be faithfully present to his presence in the world.²

Prayer and the power of the word of God. These are two of our most essential weapons in the spiritual conflict that comes with being the community of Christ's disciples. At the end of today's Scripture passage, many of the people whose town has been blessed by the presence of Jesus come to him and try to keep him from leaving them. But Jesus tells them he must travel on. Neither he, nor the kingdom he preaches, can be contained. No demon, no evil spirit, no force of darkness can overcome God's purpose to forgive, heal, and restore life. In the end, nothing can stop the spread of the gospel, and its power to set the captives free.

¹ Scott Simon, "A Meditation on Evil." NPR (April 8, 2017).

² David E. Fitch, *Seven Practices for the Church on Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2018) 120-121.