

FIRST LESSON: Daniel 7:13-15
SECOND LESSON: Mark 1:21-28
January 28, 2024

“True Authority”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

It was a beautiful summer Sunday in a small southern church, songs had been sung, and the preacher was about to begin his sermon. Suddenly there was a loud boom of thunder, and in a bright flash and smell of burning brimstone, Satan appeared next to the pastor at the pulpit. It terrified the congregation and the pastor, and they fled from every door and window. All except one old man in the second row. He sat quietly reading the church bulletin. Satan wondered, this man must be deaf and blind, or surely he would have departed in terror.

So Satan asked, “Can you see me?”

“Yes, of course,” replied the old man, still casually reading.

“Do you know who I am?” asked Satan.

“Certainly,” said the man, not even bothering to look up.

This angered Satan greatly. “Do you not realize that I am the Lord of Hell, Master of Demons, Destroyer of Lives, and the Enemy of God?”

“Sure,” replied old gentleman, now appearing to be a bit bored, but still not looking up from his reading.

Satan, now bewildered, asked “If you know who I am, and what I can do, why are you not terrified like the rest?”

For the first time the old man looked up at Satan and replied, “Because I was married to your sister for fifty years, and I figured you were here to get away from her.”

If only evil were that obvious!

Capernaum, where our story today takes place, was a prosperous fishing village on the north end of the Sea of Galilee. It was the home of Jesus’ first disciples, and it was where Jesus established himself at the beginning of his ministry. We sometimes focus so much on the divinity of Christ that we forget that he was also human and needed a roof over his head and food to eat. On the Sabbath Day he followed his usual custom of attending the local synagogue. Synagogue worship of the time was devoted to the study of scripture and prayer. The leaders were administrative in nature. Any qualified man was welcome to speak, and this is how Jesus ended up delivering what we would call a sermon.

Now in order to get a feel for what went down that day, we need to understand the normal presentation of the time. Normally speakers would describe a variety of opinions. In our world we could think of it as a research

paper full of footnotes. He might say, “in the opinion of rabbi X this is the case, but in the opinion of rabbi Y etc. Everything spoken was carefully proof texted. There were no new interpretations. It was all about nuance. People argued positions. It would put me to sleep, but if you enjoy following intricate arguments it was riveting. Jesus did not do this. Jesus read the passage and then basically said, “this is what it means.” He didn’t quote any other scholars. He didn’t seek to prove the truth of his words by backing his opinion up with other opinions. He just said it. And this is what the people meant when they said, “he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.”

The type of authority Jesus had was the kind we sense. He did not hold a position of authority. On the contrary, those in positions of authority found him to be very threatening. Jesus didn’t have the civil authority to punish or the religious authority to exclude. He simply had an undeniable authority within himself, and as a result he unnerved his opponents.

The proof of Jesus’ authority came quickly in the form of a confrontation with a demon possessed man. The text says “impure spirit” but in usage the terms are interchangeable. What I’m curious about, however, is how was it known that the man was possessed? Unlike the story I began with today there was no loud noise, smell of brimstone or special effects. Did he behave differently? What were the signs? How could anyone tell?

Today we talk about dysfunctional families, mental illness, addiction, epilepsy and disabling diseases. All of these things are real. But the problem for us is that in the ancient world any aberration at all was considered demonic. If a person spoke out in a way that contradicted the norm they were accused of being demon possessed. In the gospel of John, Jesus was accused of being demon possessed with great frequency!

The ancient world believed in demons, and they pretty much believed they were everywhere. Pagans had experts who performed exorcisms with incantations and magical techniques. Ideas varied about what demons were and where they came from, but by the time of Jesus the majority Jewish opinion was that they were fallen angels. Since demons could enter people, the Pharisees also became adept at exorcism. And Jesus kicked out demons, but interestingly in the gospel of Luke Jesus also healed people of demons.

We would make a distinction between a physical problem and a spiritual one. They did not. If they did not understand the illness, it was demonic. But what kind of demons can be healed? The kind where we would use the word “demon” figuratively. Demons like depression and active addiction, mental illness and epilepsy. Demons with a physical source can be healed.

Unfortunately, the ancient world believed demons were behind everything. Epilepsy, loss of speech, a bent back, deafness, blindness, self-destructive behavior was all attributed to demons in the New Testament. They didn’t make the distinction because they didn’t know there was one. We have an entirely different understanding than that of the 1st century, and it is not necessary for us to adopt their understanding of the demonic any more than it is necessary that we believe that the world is flat and the sun can actually stand still. We have to use our best judgement to discern the difference between human

problems and spiritual problems. Physical “demons” can be healed. Demons with a spiritual source must be expelled. Jesus did both.

This man clearly had what we might term a spiritual infestation. He had some unwelcome spiritual parasites. And these spiritual parasites recognized Jesus for who he was, crying out, “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!” This was not an illness.

Unlike his peers Jesus did not use any fancy incantations. And unlike the movies he didn’t go grab a holy symbol to hold up in front of him. He didn’t do anything other than speak with authority and say, “Be quiet!” and “Come out of him!” We’re told that the impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

Now I know that my progressive sisters and brothers would say to me, “Lisa, you’re not really going to tell these people that demons are real, are you?” Well, yeah, I am. Unlike my evangelical and charismatic sisters and brothers, however, I’m not going to give you a detailed demonic hierarchy that someone made up. I’m also not going to give you set prayers to start doing exorcisms. But spiritual evil is real, and if you have ever encountered it, you will know what I mean. I had a dog once with incredible spiritual discernment. If he growled at someone, I paid attention. I don’t know if the people he growled at were possessed by a demon, but something dark emanated from them.

Most of us have been taught to ignore our spiritual discernment. We sense darkness and evil—in a person or a place—and we cheerfully tell ourselves, “Don’t be ridiculous! It’s all in your imagination!” Children and animals pick up on spiritual realities far quicker than adults. We have taught ourselves not to see. They haven’t learned that lesson. And the reason we do this is to avoid being afraid. But there is a better option.

Jesus has all authority, and we have authority from Jesus. It doesn’t depend on us. The power and authority come from Jesus. We’re just the messenger of a powerful God. We don’t have to know the right words. We don’t have to hold up a crucifix. The weird paranormal things we see in the movies are not going to happen. The devil has no authority over us and basically can’t touch us. Like a parent ordering a child to go clean their room, we can send Satan packing. In the name of Jesus get out. End of story. Period. And if by any chance it is our imagination playing tricks on us, then no harm done. We don’t have to make our actions a big public production. We can exercise covert authority. Think of it as telling a four-year-old that they have to pick up their toys and it’s not open for debate.

I would like to say that demon possession is probably very rare. I can’t rule it out because we’re talking about a spiritual realm that we know nothing about. We live in the physical world. But I suspect that a person would have to invite evil in, perhaps in the hope of gaining power. We don’t have any office of exorcists in the Presbyterian Church. John Calvin apparently didn’t spend much time thinking about it. But any believer already has authority over spiritual evil and can send it packing. There is no need for fear. Jesus and a few stern words are all that is needed. Amen

Daniel 7:13-15

¹³ “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

Mark 1:21-28

²¹ They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. ²² The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. ²³ Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, 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!”

²⁵ “Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!” ²⁶ The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

²⁷ The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him.”²⁸ News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.