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4th Sunday after the Epiphany
29 January 2012
Grace-Trinity Lutheran Churches, Wichita
Mark 1:21-28

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

In America we simply don't believe the story about this poor man in Mark's Gospel—
the man with an unclean spirit, or an *evil* spirit.
We don't believe in ghosts.

We've come to trust our science and medicine so much,
that we don't believe in spirits or demons at all
(maybe angels, as long as their good and nice, but not demons.)

No, we're smarter than that.
We've come a long way and aren't so primitive.
We've evolved.

The French poet, Charles Baudelaire once said,
"The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist."¹

When we read this story in Mark's Gospel we think the man must have been schizophrenic,
or suffered from Turret's syndrome, or perhaps was even bi-polar—
but he certainly didn't have a demon—
there's no such thing as ghosts.

We'd prescribe this man some medicine, perhaps some counseling, then send him on his way.
And with that, the devil has another victory, another great deception, another slave.

But Christians should know better than this.

While we rejoice at the knowledge and medicine available for us today,
while we give thanks for the doctors and nurses and social workers who care for those suffering
from these true diseases—
we should also recognize that medicine cannot cure everything—
there are some things medicine simply covers up and hides.

The devil loves to hide behind these good gifts.
He loves to disguise himself as something good, something helpful, something right and kind.

Even today in the Gospel reading the devil seems to hide behind a true and proper confession:
"I know who you are: Jesus of Nazareth, the Holy One of God!" (Mk 1:24)

Devils exist even today.
They torment the innocent, they weigh down the oppressed, they impoverish the poor, they kill.

¹ "Le Joueur généreux," February 7, 1864. The original quote is: "*la plus belle des ruses du diable est de vous persuader qu'il n'existe pas!*"

Satan has no love for any of his subjects.
 He hates mankind.
 And he'll do whatever it takes to destroy us.

And that's why Jesus casts the demons out.
 He's here to save.
 He's here to release us from our demon-possession.
 He's here to free us and cure our souls and heal our guilt and forgive our sins.

But today we don't seem to see much demon-possession, at least here in America.
 But don't be fooled;
 the demons are just as active, just as feisty, just as thirsty to bring you down.

Demon-possession in this scientific world takes a very different form.
 While in Africa and much of the Eastern world demon possession is still a lively activity for all to see—

 Here in America it takes the form of a false confession,
 the demons love to mix truth with error.

Here in America the demons proclaim a doctrine that says,
 "Jesus is great, he's holy, he's inspiring, he's a visionary, he's good, he's just, he's kind."

The demons love to set Jesus as an example, the best example.
 Because once the demons have made Jesus as an example, we can then go and follow.
 With Jesus as example, we constantly work towards being more like Jesus.
 And then our salvation, our justification, our faith is in how well we do.

The demons love to use Jesus against Himself and against His church.
 They know that if Jesus is your example, you'll ultimately be crushed—
 who can be like Christ?
 Jesus as example will kill you!

Then the demons give you a new teaching, one that says,
 "All religions are basically the same. All beliefs lead the same way.
 Just be kind and do more good than bad.
 There are many paths to God."

We hear these teachings of the demons every day.
 Our world has drunk deeply of this doctrine.
 And rather than crediting this teaching to the demons, we chalk it up as science and reason.

In this world surrounded by the doctrine of the demons we are crushed.
 We believe their lies and are beat down by the guilt they lay on us.
 The demons love to remind us of sins long past—
 they love to whisper in our ears, "Did you really repent of that?"
 The Demons want only to suffocate us, to drown us in our own sin, our own guilt.

But Jesus came to cast the demons out.

He has come with authority to silence and muzzle the mouths of demons.
 He came to rebuke them, as only the Lord can do.
 He's come to destroy this false confession and belief.
 Jesus has come to destroy Satan.

But the destruction of Satan and all his evil spirits, all those threatening ghosts,
 takes place in a way completely unimaginable.

Rather than exercising His power over them,
 Satan is defeated by the cross, by the death of Jesus alone.

Even though this Jesus has power to crush Satan with a wave of His finger—
 He doesn't.

Even here in the Gospel today, the demons cried out,
 “**What have you to do with us...Have you come to destroy us?**” (Mk 1:24)

No, not yet.
 Not by force.
 Not by power.
 By weakness. By humility. By death.

Jesus defeats Satan and all his evil spirits by offering His own life up to them.
 He gives His own body to Satan to do with as he wishes.

And because Satan is so greedy, so lustful after power, he takes the bait.
 Even though he should know that the death of Jesus will mean his own death—
 Satan can't resist the temptation of doing what he's always wanted to do:
 Kill the Son of God!

So he does it—
 he eggs on the crowd all the more, “Crucify Him, crucify Him!”
 He convinces Pilate not to listen to his wife, and to fear the crowd.
 He strengthens the Roman centurions to steady the nails as they pierce His hands.
 And Satan rejoices as he watches the Son of God, the Holy One of Israel,
 hanging on the cross, naked, for all to mock and scorn.

But then, as Jesus breathes His last,
 the earth shakes, the temple curtain tears, and Satan is defeated!

Not by strength or power,
 but by weakness, shame, and death.

And it's this death of Christ on the cross that comes to you again, even today.

[BAPTISM:

This morning it came to young Chrystyan, too.

Did you pay attention? We had an exorcism! In the baptismal rite we say:

**“Therefore, depart, you unclean spirit, and make room for the Holy Spirit
in the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit.”**

For Chrystyan it call came together:

Casting out the demons, putting on the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
and with the name, the cross.

Chrystyan today, received the sign of the Holy Cross—
the sign of Satan’s defeat, the sign of sins forgiven.]

Our Lord casts out demons with His word.

He speaks forgiveness into your ears,

He washes forgiveness over your head,

He places forgiveness onto your tongue,

and He pours forgiveness into your mouth.

And it all comes by His Word,

which carries His cross to you.

And now you’re all marked with the cross.

And though the devil will continually harass and torment you,

though he’ll try to heap all sorts of false confessions and false guilt on top of you,

though he may even try to take your life—

he can’t harm you.

He has no power over you.

You belong to God.

And in Christ Satan is defeated once and for all.

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit