

## Proper 5 (B)

Mk 3.20-25

After hearing this morning's gospel lesson, you may think Jesus is talking out of both sides of his mouth...and, in a sense, you'd be right. On the one hand, he rejects the judgment of the scribes who say that his power comes from Satan. "How can Satan cast out Satan?" he asks. "If Satan has risen up against himself ... he cannot stand, but his end has come." But in fact Satan in *not* divided against himself, so we might reasonably conclude that in fact Satan's end has not come.

But on the other hand, Jesus says that, yes, Satan's end *has* come, and that he himself is the one bringing about the end of Satan's power over the earth. But he says this not because he's in league with the powers of darkness and thus evil is divided against itself; he says this because his life and his ministry is empowered by the Holy Spirit.

This has tremendous implications for how we understand our experience of the life of faith. In other words, this is just as much a story about us as it is about Jesus...or, rather, *because* this is a story about Jesus it's a story about us as well, we who are the members of his body, we who follow him as our lord and savior.

But before we get to that there's something else we probably have to deal with: this is by no means the most important question we face as we try to make sense of these stories, but it is in all likelihood a significant one. We probably need to acknowledge that stories like these raise a significant question for us: what are we supposed to do with all this language about Beelzebub and Satan and demons and spirits and all the rest of it?

Because we're enlightened, rational, modern people, right? Nobody believes in stuff like that anymore. Spirits and demons and all the rest of it went out along with the Dark Ages, and now we live in a modern world, one governed above all by science and reason and common sense. Who has time for spirits and demons?

The German Lutheran biblical scholar Rudolf Bultmann is famous for having articulated this problem in very clear and very concise terms. Bultmann wrote, "Now that the forces and the laws of nature have been discovered, we can no longer believe in spirits, whether good or evil. ... What matters is the world view [we] imbibe from [our] environment, and it is science which determines that view of the world through the school, the press, the wireless, the cinema, and all the other fruits of technical progress. ... It is impossible to use the electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles."

So what do we do with stories like this one? The first thing we should note here is that stories like this one are not intended to prove anything. In other words, the point of this story is not that there is such a thing as spirits or a being called Satan or Beelzebub; Jesus seems to have taken that for granted. So we do ourselves no favors if we come to this text expecting it's going to provide us with some kind of argument about the nature or even the existence of spiritual beings. That question is simply not in view here; it's assumed.

But saying that seems to drive us straight into the arms of Bultmann and his critique of the “New Testament world of spirits and miracles.” Are we thus faced with a stark either/or choice of having to say *either* (on the one hand) that the New Testament is to some degree unreliable because it includes stories like this one *or* (on the other) that the world is exactly as the New Testament describes it?

I think that’s a false dichotomy; our options are not nearly so stark. There are very good reasons for believing that what the New Testament suggests about the existence of spiritual powers and unseen forces should be taken very seriously indeed: to deny that is to fall prey to an unreasonable and even irresponsible assessment of just how broken we are. And, at the same time, there are very good reasons for believing it may at times be necessary to come up with different and perhaps even better ways for understanding and describing what the New Testament has to say about these spiritual forces. We don’t have to choose between one or the other.

All of this is only to say we are fully justified in taking to heart what Jesus says to us this morning. We can have another conversation some time about how exactly we may want to contextualize and interpret what he says about the existence of spiritual forces, but there’s no reason whatsoever for us to dismiss this story simply because it doesn’t make immediate sense to us because of our historical and cultural conditioning. Indeed, it may be that one of the lessons this story has for us is that *we* may be the ones who need to rethink some of our historical and cultural conditioning.

But all of that is only preliminary; as I said earlier, that’s not really the point of this story. There is something far more important and far more exciting going on here. The key to understanding what’s going on in this story is the cryptic little parable Jesus tells right in the middle of our gospel lesson: he says, “No one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.”

Now, what is this parable about? Who exactly is this “strong man,” and who exactly is the one plundering his house? As it turns out, Satan is the “strong man,” and Jesus is the one doing the plundering.

There are three distinct things going on here to which we must attend. First, what does Jesus mean when he talks about entering the strong man’s house? Second, what does he mean when he talks about tying up the strong man? Finally, what does he mean when he talks about plundering the strong man’s house? Understanding these three things gives us not only a good sense of how Jesus understood himself and his ministry, it also gives us a good sense of how we ought to think about ourselves and our ministries.

First, what does he mean when he talks about entering the strong man’s house? Quite simply, this is a reference to the incarnation, to the appearance of the Word of God in human form in the midst of a world subjected to the powers of darkness. Rather than wait for us to get our act together and look for him, God comes to us: God comes to us in the very midst of the mess we have made of this world.

If you plan to plunder someone's property, you don't enter their house by knocking on the front door: you break in. That's what the incarnation is: it's God "B & E job" on the world. This is not unlike an image C.S. Lewis once used to describe the incarnation: Lewis suggested that the incarnation of the Word is kind of like a soldier parachuting into occupied territory behind enemy lines. In other words, Jesus isn't here for fun and games, and he isn't here for tea and crumpets: he's here for war.

Second, what does he mean when he talks about tying up the strong man? This is one way Jesus described the effects of his ministry. Through his preaching, his teaching, his work as a healer, through the deliverance he provided to those in spiritual bondage, Jesus pushed back and constrained the powers of darkness. The authority and the strength of death itself was challenged, the consequences of sin and evil were mitigated.

And the forces arrayed against Jesus knew they were in trouble. The first miracle recorded in Mark's gospel is the deliverance of a man with an unclean spirit, a possessed man who Jesus encounters, not in some remote wilderness or some haunted wasteland, but in a synagogue, on the Sabbath, right there in church, a man stands up and starts screaming at him, "Why have you come? Are you here to destroy us?" The powers of darkness knew they had no authority over him; rather, *he* had authority over them, authority to bind and to loose, to cast out and to put down. His entire ministry can be seen as nothing other than one long offensive.

Third, what does he mean when he talks about plundering the strong man's goods? By now I suspect it's obvious: *we're* the goods. This whole world is the goods. The Word becomes flesh and God invaded enemy territory for no other reason than to win back his own from the powers that took them from him.

The way Jesus plundered the strong man's goods is by sanctifying himself for our sake; in other words, he plundered the strong man's goods by learning obedience. By virtue of the incarnation of the Word, our broken and misguided humanity was realigned and reoriented, away from corruption and decay and towards life, a life no longer subject to the power of sin or death. It was by conforming his will to that of his Father that Jesus reorients our humanity; our very nature, that part of us that both makes us who we are and that transcends us and binds us together, is perfected through the Son's obedience to the Father. Jesus plunders us by becoming one of us and thereby joining our life to his.

I suspect some of you might be thinking, "This guy's crazy. He's talking about spirits and powers and all kinds of weird stuff." If you're thinking that, take another look at the first part of our gospel lesson: "they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind'." This kind of language is designed to provoke. But it's not provocation for its own sake; it's provocation for the sake of reminding us how serious this is. We're not here to play games; what we do here this morning is a matter of life and death.

I said earlier that this is just as much a story about us as it is about Jesus. What I meant by that is that all the things this story tells us about Jesus and his ministry are true for his church as well. Being baptized is kind of like jumping out of a plane behind enemy lines into occupied territory. Our mission is the same one Jesus had: we are to bind and to loose, to push back the powers of

darkness and tie up the strong man. Our goal is the same one Jesus had: the redemption of the whole world. There is no part of God's green earth that is not in need of his saving grace, and we are the ones who have been charged with doing that work. We each have our own little B&E job to do: to break in to the strong man's house, tie him up, and take back what does not belong to him.

Some of us do that through preaching and proclamation. Some of us do it through acts of mercy and healing. Some of us are called to get down in the mud and wrestle with some very stubborn and very malicious powers. We may be called to do different things, but we are—each and every one of us—called. There isn't a person in this room who does not have some part to play in the drama of redemption.

When we join in that work—when we are faithful to the mission God gives to us—then we find ourselves doing the will of God, and are made brothers and sisters of our incarnate Lord, joined together by his Holy Spirit and made one family. May it be so in our midst, this day and every day. Amen.

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