

Fourth Weekend After Epiphany (B/RCL)  
Mark 1:21-28  
January 27-28, 2018  
Holy Trinity Lutheran, Manasquan, NJ

The words “Shut up!” were unthinkable in our house growing up. Not only would my sisters and I **never** have dared to say those “verboden” words to our dad, Grandma, aunts, teachers or any other adult, we wouldn’t have thought to say them to each other. That’s not always because we held each other in such high esteem, but because we knew there would be H-E-double-hockey-sticks to pay! Certain language was simply off-limits (except when my dad was driving and someone cut him off!).

At morning Bible study last week we got to talking about how coarse the language of public discourse has become. How do kids know what acceptable language is anymore? Not from watching TV or movies, or listening to many of the athletes, movie stars, musicians and singers they admire. There are more bleeps than words in some of those interviews. So we need to be careful how we speak. And weigh not just the words but the spirit of what we say. And more importantly we need to remember that what we do is ultimately more important than what we say. “Do as I say and not as I do” isn’t going to fool anyone.

In today’s Gospel Jesus “rebukes” the unclean spirit that’s possessed the man in the synagogue, saying:

***“Be silent, and come out of him!”***  
(Mark 1:25)

**“Be silent!”** can also be translated, **“Shut up!”** Jesus has a no-holds-barred approach to His battle with Satan. Our Lord’s arrival in the world was a “rude” wake-up call to all the alien forces in this world that were working non-stop to unravel God’s creation and destroy God’s children. St. Mark

emphasizes that fact by making this exorcism Jesus' **first act of public ministry**. *Rise, Shine, You People!* (ELW 665) is our sending hymn today. The second verse begins:

“See how he sends the pow’rs of evil **reeling**...”

The evangelist tells 4 specific stories about our Lord casting out Satan:

- This quick one, about the unclean spirit in the synagogue:
- The much more involved, lengthy one about the Gerasene demoniac inhabited by “Legion,” many, many demons who were sent into a herd of pigs that then careened off a cliff into the sea (5:1-20);
- The heart-wrenching one about a Syrophenician woman who begged the Lord to heal her afflicted daughter, a Gentile mother who humbly and faithfully willing to accept even “crumbs” of grace (7:24-30);
- The beautiful one about a father whose son was tormented by a demon that caused the boy to roll into the fire and tumble into water, a desperate dad who confessed to the Lord, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (9:24) (9:14-29)

Each person who had been out of his or her mind, each person whom Satan had tried to wrestle away from God, each physically, mentally, or spiritually sick human being was made whole by Jesus of Nazareth, consistently and correctly identified by the unclean spirits as the Holy One of God.

“See how he sends the pow’rs of evil **reeling**...”

How nice for them. What about us? Jesus Christ comes into the world, announces that the kingdom of God has come near, then proves that’s true by exorcising demons, healing the sick, raising the dead. So 2,000 years later is there any less evil in the world than there used to be? ‘Wouldn’t really think so after catching up on the news, right? This last week, among other tragedies and atrocities, we heard that:

- A trusted physician who abused over 150 gymnasts and other athletes was sentenced to between 40 and 175 years in prison; his actions were evil, but so was the **inaction** of the authorities to whom the abused girls and women reported the crime, to no avail.
- Taliban terrorists in Kabul drove a decoy ambulance into a throng of people and detonated it, killing 95 and injuring many more.

- Over a million children are in immediate risk of starvation in South Sudan. Drought is to blame, but so are politicians driven by evil greed who mismanage foreign aid and line their own pockets instead of caring for their people.
- Over 5,000 Rohingya have fallen ill of diphtheria in Bangladesh refugee camps. The evil of discrimination has led to persecution and eviction resulting in the creation of these poor refugees.
- Dozens of Nigerians drowned when an overcrowded boat of desperate migrants sank off of Tunisia. They fled unemployment, poverty, violence. They were preyed upon by unscrupulous sailors and boat owners who use others' misery to feather their own nest. The same can be said of the "coyotes" who take the money of desperate Mexicans who think they'll be led across the border but are left to die in the desert between their native country and the U.S.

So -- is there any less evil in the world than there used to be?

After the Las Vegas massacre the governor of Kentucky voiced his opposition to proposed legislation to prohibit bump stocks by saying, "You can't regulate evil." A columnist's response was, "Maybe not, but you can definitely try to disarm evil."<sup>1</sup> The Irish statesman Edmund Burke once warned what happens when we stand passively by, instead: "The only thing **necessary for the triumph of evil** is for good men to do nothing." Pastor Sara Lilja, executive director of our Lutheran Episcopal Advocacy Ministry of NJ, looks at the positive side of the coin:

When we accompany others and build bridges, God is present and unleashes the power to set people free from evil.<sup>2</sup>

Christ still "sends the pow'r of evil reeling." On Calvary, the ransom was paid that sets us free from Satan's thrall. On Easter morning, the victory was complete in the resurrection of our Lord from the dead. But although the war is won, battles will be waged until He comes again in glory. Jesus Christ saved us from death and the devil when we were baptized; He deputized us to send Satan packing, to send the pow'r of evil reeling, to say "Shut up!" to the devil, whenever he natters in our ear, whispers lies, shouts profanities, or babbles blasphemies, like, "There is no God" or "There **is** a God, but not One that loves YOU."

When we practically care for those who are impoverished, giving them food or shelter or refuge or healthcare, we **are** sending the pow'r of evil reeling. We are being channels of hope and are offering an antidote to despair. When we address the causes of poverty, doing our best to prevent hunger and homelessness and all the ills that poverty breeds, we are also sending the pow'r of evil reeling. Luther was emphatic that being a faithful Christian includes being a good citizen, helping to shape policy and influence leaders to be about God's work in the world and to help the kingdom come. It doesn't take a degree in political science to weigh in, to call a legislator, to exercise your right to vote. It doesn't take a degree in theology to figure out what direction the Lord would have us go. Remember the 2 greatest commandments: love God above all else and your neighbor as yourself. Remember the passage from Micah 6, which we sang last week in the hymn *Come, Live in the Light* (ELW 720):

*We are called to act with justice,  
we are called to love tenderly,  
we are called to serve one another,  
to walk humbly with God.*

This weekend we have our annual meeting, preparing for this new year of ministry. The third verse of *Rise, Shine, You People!* acknowledges the challenges the world presents and the power God gives us to bring in the kingdom each day, as individuals and as a community:

*Come, celebrate; your banners high unfurling,  
Your songs and prayers against the darkness hurling.  
To all the world go out and tell the story of Jesus' glory.*

Amen

<sup>1</sup>Gail Collins, "Trump Can't Tweet Guns," *NY Times* (January 25, 2018), A27.

<sup>2</sup>Sara Lilja, on-line "Weekly Witness," LEAM-NJ (January 24, 2018).

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham