

Spiritual Warfare Then and Now
Luke 4:31-38 (39-44)
Fourth Sunday in Epiphany
February 3, 2019

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text focuses on the first half of our Gospel reading, highlighted by these words: *In the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, "Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!"*

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

This past week in our household devotions, my wife, kids and I were working on our memorization of the third petition of the Lord's Prayer – "Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven" – and its meaning. Recall these words of the Small Catechism:

"God's will is done when he breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature, which do not want us to hallow God's name or let his kingdom come."

That's a pretty good description of our text this morning, isn't it? Consider what's going in our gospel reading. Jesus is teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath – where and when God's holy name is hallowed by us and His kingdom comes to us through His Holy Word. Jesus is teaching – and the hearers are marveling at and captivated by his teaching because it carries *authority*. That word is different than "ability" or "power." The scribes had the *ability* to speak God's Word, but they spoke it as those without authority... you might say,

it's the difference between someone reading out of Luke 4 and trying to make sense of it versus saying "Wow, that person speaks in a way you can tell he really knows what he's talking about!" But we ought not mistake that for merely being energetic or winsome: Joel Osteen is energetic and winsome, but he speaks without authority. Motivational speakers are energetic and winsome, but they have no authority in the Word of God.

So, we get a sense of how the crowds understand this Jesus. He handles the Word of Truth as if he owns it (and, of course, he does...but they don't yet know that). And they are captivated by his teaching and marvel at it.

And, of course, the demons can have none of that. The devil doesn't want God's name and Word hallowed and revered; he wants the crowds to *not* be astonished. So, what do the demons do? They create a diversion. The demon takes hold of a man and brings him into the synagogue and cries out in a loud voice to create a stir.

Now, you know how easily we get distracted in the house of God. A cell phone can ring, a child can cry, someone can sneeze, our own minds can wander so that – though we're in the pew, we're a thousand miles away. And, if all those small things can distract us from the Word of God, how much more so when the demons come. Imagine the scene of someone standing in the midst of the assembly and acting as if they've just 'snapped'... they start speaking as if angry or schizophrenic or demonic. And (the devil's whole goal), that

outburst seizes the whole assembly and becomes the talk of the hour, so that (as the devil intends) everyone has forgotten about and lost focus on the Word of God.

This is the demon's gameplan in the synagogue. But even the demons must confess Christ: "I know who you are: the Holy One of God." And so, coming into his presence, the demon is immediately on the defensive: "What are you going to do to us? Have you come to destroy us?"

Now, take a step back for a moment and see how this same spiritual warfare plays out throughout the world. In our text, the demon is *first* among the crowds to properly identify Jesus – he's the Holy One of God. Yes, in spiritual warfare, the demonic are much quicker to recognize Christ than are those who lackadaisically don't think there's much spiritual warfare out there at all! In our world, the church seems to sit idle and be so slow to confess Christ to the world... seems to not notice how potent His Word is in the world's ears! Because the baptized (as the rite of Baptism says) are kept safe from the unbelieving world in the ark of the Church, it almost seems the believers forget the dangerous waters that surround the ark. Yet, the unbelieving world, ruled by this world's evil prince, scowls fierce at the Christ; in its ignorance and its hatred of Christ's threat to its fleshly freedoms, the world is actually confessing Christ as the Holy One. How much do the godless rage in anger, trying to intimidate and silence the Church in any and every matter that affects public

life! And they do it precisely because the depths of their conscience know their sinful freedoms depend on the devil holding out against this Holy One of God. *That*, friends, is spiritual warfare. In one way or another, almost everything in life – no matter how it’s dubbed ‘secular’ or ‘social’ or ‘cultural’ – it’s *spiritual warfare*. – specifically because humans are *spiritual* beings.

So, by clamoring about as much as possible, the demons seek to distract from the Word of God (even, later in the reading, pointing to the *person* of Christ so as to distract from the *preaching* of Christ), so that Christ is not hallowed and our easily-distracted hearts do not want to dwell upon and meditate upon and depend upon Christ’s coming kingdom of Word and Sacrament. But, in our text (and later in the reading), Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit and says (woodenly translated), “Be muzzled” – as a dog is muzzled so that it can make no more noise. “Be muzzled and come out of him,” is the command in the synagogue, and the demon must obey – without even causing any harm, the text says.

And at this show of Christ’s authority a wave of awe passes over the whole gathering and they say to one another, “What is this word?” Notice the question? “What is this *word*?” The very thing the demons sought to distract from; Jesus uses the demon’s evil intent to work His Holy good and will. But, of course, to marvel at the Word (or, in our day, the Word and Sacraments) is not to marvel only at the holy things, but to marvel at the Christ who has authority to use

them as He wills. We adore the Word and Sacraments not for their own sake but because Christ uses them to give us Himself. We can't have Christ apart from these gifts. His Holy Word not only points us to and tells us of his holy perfect mission as the Messiah, his holy life and his holy sacrifice... but that same Word also gives us the *benefits* of Christ's Work: "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of Christ." And again, "we preach Christ crucified" St Paul says. Why? Because "God gave His only begotten Son (unto death), that whoever believes in Him (has faith in him, faith created by the Word) shall not perish but have everlasting life." So then, to marvel at the Word, to marvel at the Sacraments that same Word of Christ makes and effects, that *is* to marvel at the Christ.

And, in our text, as the crowds marvel at this Jesus and His Word, it is they – not the demons – that begin to make noise. Verse 37, as it speaks of how their marveling began to spill over their lips in the form of reports to others, it could be woodenly translated from the Greek, "And *noise* journeyed out concerning him into all the places of the neighboring region."

Notice that? *Noise* journeyed out concerning him. *They*, not the demons, *they* now made the noise about this Jesus. Far from being distracted by the demons to never hear of this Jesus, the neighboring regions – whether they wanted to or not – were about to hear the great noise all about this Jesus.

Translate that, friends, into your own lives. If Calvary Lutheran Church doesn't go out and confess Jesus and His Word, how do we expect our spouses, children, siblings, extended families, and the Elgin community to hear the noise? Don't the Scriptures say that ours is the joy and holy calling to "proclaim the glories of him who called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light"? If we don't speak of what is happening here for our church, why would we expect others – family, friends, co-workers, neighbors – to come... or to even know why they ought come?

Are we afraid for our reputations? Isn't such fear because of the noise of the devil intimidating us? Are we afraid for our jobs? Again, the noise of him who tempted Christ himself with bread for the belly. Are we afraid we won't have the words? Why try to speak from your own lackluster description of the Word instead of just letting the Word speak with its own authority? For example, how do you answer when your friend asks, "Why do you go to church?" Do you answer as those who have no authority in their word and say, "Well, I like it; it makes me feel good; it's what my tradition is; my family's always done this" – so that your hearers suspect you really don't know why you come? Or do you answer with the authority of the Word of Christ, "I go to church because faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of Christ." And again, "I go to church because all who received him, who believed on his name He gave the right to be children of God, born not of the flesh, nor of the will of

man, but of God. We are God's children now; the reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. But we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared, but when he comes, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is." It's that simple. Use the authority of Christ's Word!

Now, you might be intimidated that the world out there will respond with the disdain of the demons. And, yes, some (many!) will. But as Christ's Word muzzles the demons and brings the crowds to marvel at his Word of truth, some – even if not all or even the majority – some will marvel at the authority of the Word you confess. So go make noise in your daily life confession before family, friends, and the neighboring regions. Because if we don't, who will? If we are not the Church in this place, who will be? Is it faithful for us to wait for the Lord to raise up stones to proclaim his excellencies and put to shame our unwillingness?

Now, you might think that means a lot falls on *us* to properly use God's Word and confess his name. And, in one sense, a sense of confession and evangelism, yes – if we do not confess it, who in the whole world will? But, in the sense of weight and burden, do not grow weary at the seeming enormity of the task, for how does the Small Catechism's explanation of "Thy will be done" conclude?: "And [God's will is done] when *He* strengthens and keeps us firm in His Word and faith until we die."

Yes, *He* strengthens and keeps us firm in his Word. And he does so specifically *by* His Word. In our text, it is not the people who defended themselves, but Christ – the Word made flesh – who, with His spoken Word, defended them from being distracted or intimidated by the demons. *Christ* was the focus of their hope and the source of their amazement. “For us fights the valiant one whom God himself elected.”

That’s still true today. His Word is first and foremost “for you,” and – only in the joy of that comfort – that the Word is first and foremost *for you* – are you eager to carry that Word *with* you. The church lives and breathes and has its being not because of how well you confess before a faithless world or because of how well you fight spiritual warfare with the Word of God (though God does call you to both those realities). Rather, the church lives and breathes and has its being because Christ’s Word is powerful *upon you, for you*. His Word is for you. “These things are written that *you* may believe, and that by believing *you* may have life in His Name.”

And that means, Christ himself -the subject, object, content and substance of that Word – Christ himself conducts spiritual warfare for you... at the font (“Depart you unclean spirit”), in the Holy Ministry (“Penitent, I forgive you your sins”), and at the Supper (“Sojourner, this holy body and precious blood strengthen you and keep you steadfast in the one true faith”).

You see, while it's true that our life *is* one of spiritual warfare, it's also true that this Divine Service is also spiritual warfare, isn't it? In our daily life, it seems as if the devil, the world, and our sinful nature have the upper hand. We are so easily maligned by the world, accused by the devil, distracted and tempted by our sinful nature. But, in the Divine Service, Christ our field general conducts spiritual warfare to beat back the devil, the world, and our sinful nature which do not want us to hallow God's name or let his kingdom come.

So then, we have every reason to marvel at the authority of Christ's Word in this Divine Service. As we said on the Sunday after Christmas this year, Joseph and Mary didn't marvel at the words spoken of the baby Jesus out of *disbelief* at the Word, but they marveled because the Gospel always is marvelous, always is worthy of our marveling.

Yes, we have every reason to marvel at the authority and power of Jesus, as He works in this Divine Service, as He brings the benefits of His cross to us, as He safeguards in our daily baptismal life, as He equips us to confess the 'noise' of his news and proclaim the praises of him who called us out of spiritual darkness into his marvelous light.

In the Name of the Father
 And of the Son
 And of the Holy Spirit.
 + AMEN +

Rev. Mark C. Bestul
 February 3, 2019