

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

January 28, 2024 – 4<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY – YR. B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Spiritual War? Jesus Wins it for Us!*”

Deuteronomy 18:15-20 (A true prophet speaks only God’s words)  
Psalm 111 (The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom)  
1 Corinthians 8:1-13 (Set a good example for all believers)  
St. Mark 1:21-28 (Jesus commands unclean spirits and they obey)

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Wow. What a c-r-azy worship service is described in today’s Gospel lesson! Here’s Jesus, preaching the Word of God with an authority His fellow parishioners had never heard before, and in the midst of this awe-inspiring sermon straight from God’s mouth, a demon-possessed man interrupts. Or, I should say, the demons inside the man are what disturbs the peace. It is *they* who shout, “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.”

Before we dig further into the issue of demons, let’s first take apart their anxious—and oddly truthful—outburst. Number 1: They *know* the preacher is Jesus of Nazareth—so, evil spirits have *some* knowledge of us human beings. Number 2: The unclean spirits are worried that Jesus has come to destroy them. Ah, the devil’s minions are fully cognizant of the superior power of God. They know that God alone has the authority to obliterate them forever. This awareness of Jesus’ sovereignty and power is still in its infancy among the human beings surrounding Him in that synagogue. But the demons sure know! Number 3: They proclaim Jesus as the “Holy One of God,” that is, the Messiah who was to come. Now that’s incredible, because hardly anyone believed that, not even some of Jesus’ own disciples.

Notice how Jesus responds. He does not engage the demons or converse with the possessed man. Rather, He commands the evil spirits to be quiet and depart—and *they do!* The people in the synagogue cry out, “He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” What’s this? Demons *obey* God-in-person? Wasn’t Satan kicked out of heaven for *rebellious against* God Almighty? I refer you to Isaiah 14:12 (GNV): “How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning?” And in Luke 10, verse 18 (AMP), Jesus Himself testifies, “I watched Satan fall from heaven like [a flash of] lightning.”

It would seem that after the initial rebellion of the devil and his angels, they are now so weakened they have to obey God’s directives. This should encourage us in the spiritual battle. Now, I know most people don’t want to hear or talk about, spiritual warfare, evil spirits, demons, and so forth. But in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus casts demons out of men, women, and children 12 times.<sup>1</sup>

Also in those three Gospels, Jesus gave His disciples—and the 70 he sent forth—“power over unclean spirits” (Luke 10:19). However, it’s interesting to note that in the Gospel of John, Jesus is never shown speaking to or casting out a demon.<sup>2</sup> (But that’s another Bible lesson.) My point is, if Jesus took demons and evil spirits seriously, so should we.

As a matter of fact, St. Paul also believed in spiritual warfare, writing in Ephesians 6:10-11 (NIV) “... be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” St. Peter also took evil seriously. He writes in his Epistle (1 Peter 5:8) “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” And our Lord’s brother James, recommends in His Epistle (4:7): “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”

The trouble with talking about the devil and his accomplices is that even Christians tend to attribute too much power and influence to Satan. We forget that he is only a fallen angel, not a god. The devil is not omniscient—he can't read your mind, as Almighty God can. Nor is he omnipotent—he's not all-powerful, and he certainly is not more powerful than God or His Incarnate Son, Jesus.

The evil one—“*ha- śātān*” in Hebrew, a generic noun meaning “accuser” or “adversary,” derived from a verb meaning primarily “to obstruct” or “to oppose”—definitely wants to cause God's people trouble. And he has unlimited opportunities to wreak havoc in the lives of humans that don't believe in the God of the Bible. To paraphrase Blaise Pascal, a 17<sup>th</sup>-century French mathematician, physicist, inventor, philosopher, and Christian author, “There is a God-shaped [emptiness] in the heart of [every person] which cannot be satisfied by any created thing but only by God the Creator, made known through Jesus Christ.”<sup>3</sup> Too many people try to fill that God-shaped void with things which end up causing them to feel even more empty and unhappy. Only knowing Jesus can fill that soul hole—and if we do not know and enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ, that which is not of God will get into us and we will be in far worse danger, spiritually.

So, if we concede that we, as Christians, live on the battlefield with the forces of evil—confident that our Commander, Jesus, is all-powerful and will vanquish them at His return—then how do we cope with the daily assaults of the devil now? We return to Ephesians, Chapter 6:13-18 (NIV): “put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of **truth** buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of **righteousness** in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the **gospel of peace**. In addition to all this, take up the shield of **faith**, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of **salvation** and the **sword of the Spirit**, which is **the word of God**. And **pray** in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.”

Quite a laundry list! So let's unpack it: To withstand evil—in the form of spiritual mischief that causes us aggravation and distraction, stuff going wrong in bizarre ways when it shouldn't, and things that are more fearsome—here's what we need as our weapons:

First, **Truth**: Jesus said, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Jesus is God's Truth in person, just as the Bible is God's Truth in writing. So it's important for us to know both what Jesus says and does, and what Scripture tells us.

Second, **Righteousness**: Before you get nervous about having to be perfect, we need to remember that our righteousness comes from Christ alone—we have none of our own. In Romans 3:22, St. Paul says “righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.” Once again, we must have faith in Christ to gain any ground against the devil.

Third, **The Gospel of Peace**: The word “gospel” means “good news,” and refers to the sacrifice Jesus made on our behalf so that we could be saved. As a result, this brings us peace, both as a spiritual experience and as a factual reality in terms of our relationship with God. Because of Christ's atonement and the forgiveness He offers us, we are no longer sinners at war with a holy God.

Fourth: **Faith**, which Paul refers to as a “shield.” Genuine faith based on a knowledge and understanding of Scripture, as well as a relationship with Jesus Christ, can protect us against the lies and wiles of the devil, because we know better!

Fifth: **Salvation**—the result of our faith. Yes, we are saved by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, but unless we accept and believe this through faith, our salvation isn't complete and effective.

Sixth: **The Sword of the Spirit** which is **the Word of God**. Once again, we see the importance of Scripture in our battle with evil. The scary thing is, the devil can quote Scripture, too. When Christ was being taunted, tempted, and tested by the Adversary in the desert, he said to Jesus: “If you are the Son of God ... throw yourself down. For it is written: ‘He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”

Here, the devil is quoting Psalm 91, verses 11-12. *Yikes!* Is *he* reading the Bible more often than *we* are? Interesting, Jesus responds to all of Satan's nonsense by quoting three passages from Deuteronomy, and then the Accuser of the Faithful goes away.

One thing that kind of bothers me is that in the Old Testament story of Job, we read that God *permitted* the devil to harass Job, to take away everything he held dear, to afflict him with terrible illness, and so on. The Lord and Lucifer sort of had a bet going that Job would curse God and die (as Job's 'nice' wife suggested he do). God wanted to prove that Job would not succumb. Rather he would continue trusting God and praising Him no matter what happened. And that's exactly how it went. Because of Job's faithfulness, God restored everything to him many times over. By the time we get to the end of the book, we realize there are two points: Nothing happens without God's authority and will, and second, remaining faithful to God benefits us in the end, even if we have to suffer much hardship, pain, and things we don't understand, along the way.

I hope you will be encouraged by today's Gospel story, and some of the things I've brought up. Because today's Gospel message is that Jesus has power and authority as no one else—and that's because He's God. Moreover, the Lord is with us always, and He is there to protect and defend us. He also sends His holy angels to help us. However, we also have to cooperate with God by having trust, faith, praying at all times, and the rest of St. Paul's list in Ephesians 6.

I'd like to close with a prayer for protection, adapted from texts by two pastors:

“Lord Jesus, You are the highest authority, and there is no spiritual power above You. Therefore, we hide in You, as You are our safe shelter. We are confident that in submitting to You, no evil will ever be able to conquer us. Empower us to be strong in You and in the power of Your might as we put on Christ as our armor, protecting our souls as we trust in You.<sup>4</sup> Please send Your holy angels to guard us and protect us from all sickness, harm, and accidents.<sup>5</sup> And keep us always close to You.” *Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> Many (Mk 1:32-34)(Mt 8:16-17) (Lk 4:40-41); people In Galilee (Mk 1:39); a man At the Capernaum Synagogue (Mk 1:21-28)(Lk 4:31-37); a man In Capernaum (Mt 9:32-33); a second man in Capernaum? (Mt 12:22)(Lk 11:14); People In Capernaum? (Lk 6:17-19); the Gentile woman's daughter (Mt 15:21-28)(Mk 7:24-30); Mary Magdalene (and other women) (Lk 8:2)(Mk 16:9); people at the Sea Of Galilee (Mk 3:10-12); two men at Gergesenes (Gadarenes) (Mt 8:28-32)(Mk 5:1-13)(Lk 8:26-33); a man's son at Caesarea Philippi? (Mt 16:13) (Mt 17:14-21)(Mk 9:17-29) (Lk 9:38-47); a disabled woman(Lk 13:10-13 – implied). Steve Shirley, “How many times did Jesus cast out a demon in the Bible?” [JesusAlive.cc](https://jesusalive.cc) <<https://jesusalive.cc/times-jesus-cast-out-demon/>> 22 January 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Shirley, *op. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> Blaise Pascal, “Quotes,” [goodreads.com](https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/801132-there-is-a-god-shaped-vacuum-in-the-heart-of-each), n. d. <<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/801132-there-is-a-god-shaped-vacuum-in-the-heart-of-each>> 22 January 2024.

<sup>4</sup> K-Love Pastors, “8 Spiritual Prayers for Protection,” 9 January 2023, [Klove.com](https://www.klove.com) <<https://www.klove.com/resources/marriage/8-prayers-for-spiritual-protection-4501>> 22 January 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Francis MacNutt, n.d. “Cutting Free Prayer,” [Christian Healing Ministries](https://www.christianhealingmin.org) <<https://www.christianhealingmin.org/images/CHM/downloads/CuttingFreePrayer.pdf>> 22 January 2024.