

Epiphany 4 1/28/24  
Mark 1:21-28 B

**“A NEW TEACHING WITH AUTHORITY! HE COMMANDS EVEN THE UNCLEAN SPIRITS, AND THEY OBEY HIM.”**

I have a confession to make this morning: I am not always fond of dogs. Please, hear correctly what I said: I did not say that I don't like dogs -- Bandit was my best friend for many years, after all. What I don't like is when I am pursued, hounded, hunted, and mauled by a mean, vicious creature that is supposed to be man's best friend, especially when I'm running.

I always remember one route I would run in my first parish. There wasn't a lot of paved streets so you would have to run gravel roads in the countryside, and I swear, this ½ grizzly, ½ wolf, and ½ spoiled poodle just had a 6<sup>th</sup> sense of when I would be arriving. He would bark, bare his teeth, and let me know how much he was looking forward to having me for a snack. But, I was safe. The dog was bound fast with a strong chain. He could not hurt me.

My Friends in Christ, Revelation 20:2 tells us that the devil is bound. He's chained up, defeated by Jesus Christ. The devil's head is crushed. Because of Jesus' victory over sin, death, and the devil, the evil foe cannot do you harm, but he'll try. The Accuser will hound you day and night. He will bark ferociously; he will howl and try to scare you to death. He will whine and look adorable to entice you to him. But, that is all he can do. Because of Jesus, the devil cannot hurt you.

That is: if you stay away from him. The only way the devil can harm you is if you are foolish enough to wander into that little circle where his chain permits him to do.

Sounds easy, right? But next Sunday, what if I showed up with my head bandaged, my arm in a sling, and a huge wrap on my leg? And you would wonder, so you would ask, "What happened, Pastor?" I would say I was out for my morning run and this chained dog barked, and growled, and foamed at the mouth, so I went to that dog to be his friend. And you know what you would thinking. Another, yet another, living proof, that pastor is not a very smart man. So, let me ask you a question: Why do you try to be the devil's friend? You are no match for the devil.

The devil is your mighty and lifelong enemy, and he is crafty. Rather than bark and bare his teeth at you, sometimes he'll whine and whimper like a cute little puppy who just wants to play with you and couldn't possibly hurt you. He wants to be your friend. So, the father of all lies will whisper, "you don't have to worry about this little sin. It's not going to hurt you. It will make you happy. Go ahead, indulge a little."

This is where the devil is particularly clever. He tempts you to indulge in a little sin. He'll even tell you Jesus will forgive you. But remember, Jesus set you free from sin, not to sin. He set you free so that you may serve your neighbor, not the loves and desires of your flesh.

"Look at yourself," the evil one will whisper. "You are popular, successful." You are not a vile sinner like, well, you know who... His/her sin is really bad. Everyone knows what he/she did. No one will ever know your sin."

"God made you smart," he will whimper. "You don't have to believe all that stuff in the Bible. You're intelligent enough to know that you don't have to buy into that not committing adultery, or not hating your neighbor, or not sharing a little tidbit about your neighbor."

“Go ahead,” he whines. Love yourself above anything else. Ignore your spouse, your children, your aging parents, your responsibilities at work, your neighbor in need, your spiritual life. You go, get what you want!”

Do you see how the devil works? Chained up, he sounds like a cute, cuddly puppy. But, beware. Temptations always start small. A wandering eye, a heart that is never content; never satisfied. A little sinful pride. A little love for self and your inclinations, your wants, above all else. Each one lures you in. That’s how the devil works. He baits you, a little at a time, until you’ve wandered closer and closer...and you’re inside the circle of his chain. It may seem like that harmless puppy just wants to lick your face, but he wants to bite you, locking his jaws onto you, taking you to be with him in hell forever and ever.

Of course, the devil doesn’t always whine. Sometimes, he barks to terrorize you.

When you bear a heavy cross, he will snarl and tell you that God does not care for you, that God is most certainly punishing you. He’ll put all kinds of temptations and worries and fears before you so that you will convince yourself that you don’t have time for family devotions, and going to church. The devil will make you feel sorry for yourself, persuading you that you’ve had it so rough that you deserve to indulge in your pet sin to make yourself feel better.

So, when the devil whimpers and whispers, growls and howls, examine yourself. Does a little temptation lead to the great guilt of sin? Do trials and afflictions leave you in doubt of God’s love? Do you indulge in your favorite sin, figuring that you can be forgiven anyway?

Dear Child of God, the devil will outsmart you every time. You have no strength or ability to defeat him. You're no match for him. You need someone to defeat him for you.

That, Dear Saints of God, is the Good News of the Gospel. Just as He came to Capernaum, Jesus came to crush the devil's head, to completely, thoroughly defeat him for all eternity.

In Capernaum, Jesus entered the synagogue and began teaching. Among those in the synagogue was a man with an unclean spirit. Isn't that interesting – that unclean spirit is not afraid to go into the House of God, because it is not afraid of the teachings of the scribes. That unclean spirit, that demon, knows who Jesus is and wants nothing to do with Him. *"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"* (v. 24).

The unclean spirit was no match for Jesus. *"Be silent, and come out of him,"* Jesus spoke (v. 25). And that demon had no choice. It was no match for Jesus. Jesus sends that little devil running.

This Sunday of Epiphany teaches us that Jesus appeared to us in human flesh to crush the head of the devil. *The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil,* the Apostle John writes (1 Jn 3:8).

Jesus went to the cross and suffered the judgment for your sins. He suffered God's wrath and punishment for you, because of your sinfulness. Because He did, the devil's head is crushed, the accuser is silenced, the father of all lies is disarmed.

You're no match for the devil. So, Jesus defeated Him, once for all. And, He shares that victory with you. He baptizes you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. He sets you free from the

devil and makes you His own child. He gives you His very Body and Blood to eat and drink for the forgiveness of your sins. And when your sins are gone, there is nothing left for the devil to accuse you with.

As you walk by faith through this Valley of the Shadow of death, you'll be tempted and troubled by the devil's barks and whines. Do not count of your strength or smarts or commitment to resist him. Count of Christ, who comes to you in His Word. Remember your Baptism. Read God's Word, memorize it, fill your mind with it. Come to the Lord's Table. And when you fall for the devil's ways and sin, confess your sin. And, rejoice that He forgives and strengthens you.

You are no match for the devil. But Jesus is. The devil is beaten, bound, and chained because Jesus has defeated him.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.