

Erika Nilsen
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Sermon: Mark 1:

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I bring you grace and peace from our Lord and Savior Jesus – Amen.

While we have hardly even had winter yet – in my mind it is never too early to start dreading Spring. You might be thinking – why on earth, Pastor Erika would you dread spring. I dread spring for 1 reason and 1 reason alone [picture of poison ivy] This pesky poison wreaked serious havoc on my life in the summer of 2001 – the first summer we lived in Baxter. We were excited to do some landscaping – and began clearing brush and twigs, digging in the dirt and planting a small garden – only to be attacked by that awful itchy – miserable weed. I had never seen such a thing in my life. In fact – I ended up in Urgent Care – because I truly had no idea what was going on and why I was in such misery. I soon came to find out that Baxter was built on a pile of poison ivy – and I had no idea how pervasive and potent and powerful it was.

So we went on the attack – or should I say – David went on the attack – and cut the poison way back. And in my estimation – out of sight – out of mind. Spring would come – and I couldn't see it – so I figured it was gone – and I would start to dig again – in hopes and dreams of a garden – and each year it was the same. At some point– that poisonous pesky weed would get me.

Realizing it was in the dirt – David continued to cut it back – but he also started to spray it – in an attempt to kill it at its root – the only defense against poison ivy – and while we have certainly held back our little back yard enemy – it is by no means destroyed – and each spring – our vigilance and our commitment to “destroy” arises again.

Thinking back – I wish someone had told us – at the very beginning – what life in the backyard of Baxter was going to be like. I wish someone had not only told us to be aware – but had also armed us for the fight. ?

What we hear in the Gospel of Mark this morning is Jesus – telling us straight out – at the very beginning of things what life in the kingdom of God is going to be like. You see – what we heard today was the first miracle story that takes place in the Gospel of Mark – and “firsts” should always make you sit up and take notice.

Jesus has been baptized and has heard those wonderful words from God, “you are my beloved, with you I am well pleased.” He has begun his ministry in Galilee, he has invited his disciples to follow him and they go to Capernaum. When it is the Sabbath, he goes to the synagogue and starts teaching. So far so good. Just then, there was a man in the synagogue with an unclean spirit – and the spirit cried out [interesting – it is the unclean spirit that first relates to Jesus – not Jesus to the spirit] it cries out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?” What a question - “Have you come to destroy us?” To which Jesus replies, in not so many words, “You better believe it. You better believe it!

Jesus has come to proclaim God's kingdom on earth and what that looks like and sounds like, as theologian David Lose says, is Jesus, “opposing the forces of evil which would rob the children of God of all that God hopes and intends for them”

So what life in the kingdom of God is going to be like – first and foremost is us having someone who

will fight for us – who will stare down the unclean spirits that try to possess our world, our lives, our hearts and will demand their silence and their removal – Jesus is here to take away the power of the forces of evil that seek to take us away from the heart of God.

The Gospel of Mark doesn't waste anytime making sure we know that Jesus is fighting for us – our champion – our sure defender.

Now I know that sometimes we get a little uncomfortable with talk of evil forces at work in the world or in our lives - but I truly believe that it is impossible to take an honest look at this world and not see the power and the presence of forces that are diametrically opposed to God's will. Again, as David Lose says, “ There are forces that rather than bless, they curse; rather than build up, they tear down; rather than encourage, they disparage; rather than promote love, they sow hate; rather than draw us together, they seek to split us apart.”

And they are at work in our world and in our lives.

Last week I received a call from the Invisible Children organization – they are going to be in our area this coming April and wanted to know if they could come here again and continue to tell the story of the children in Northern Uganda who have been abducted, murdered, drugged, raped, forced to be child soldiers of violence and rage all at the hand of Joseph Kony – a self declared prophet of darkness. It is not only there hope, but with every dollar they raise and every letter of support they receive they are pledging to bring Joseph Kony to trial and end his reign of terror. Unclean spirits are at work in the world.

Last week I read yet another article about growing poverty in America and malnutrition in our children – and another about global poverty and hunger. For there to be such disparity in a world where there is enough for everyone - unclean spirits are at work in the world.

And I wonder sometimes, and maybe you do too – what's Jesus doing about this? I thought he said, he was coming to oppose these very unclean spirits and these very forces that leave the world looking like a far distant reflection of the kingdom of God.

But let's go back to the story of Jesus and the unclean spirit for a moment – Jesus went to church to teach. And while he was teaching, there was a man – who had also gone to church that day – who was possessed by a force that was controlling his life – and he needed to be set free. He was just one person – who had shown up at church that day – just like you and me – and in the presence of Jesus, that which possessed him – was spoken into nonexistence – the word of Christ – transformed his life.

The point is this – Jesus is opposing evil forces and unclean spirits in this world – by starting with you and longing to set you free from that which possesses your heart. And that freedom may come dramatically in a word – like the man in the synagogue. That freedom may come from Jesus working through the support and prayer from others. It may come from Jesus working through treatment centers and support groups and ongoing friendships and Bible studies.

So what is it for you? What possesses you this morning? What did you come here carrying, bearing as a heavy burden that opposes the will of God for your life – that robs you of all that God hopes and intends for you? What force is at work in your heart – or your life? What unclean spirit is speaking a lie to you . . .

Too often I have been possessed with self doubt or envy – too often I have listened to some unclean

spirit telling me that I deserve everything I have and even more or better – no matter what the cost to others. Too often I encounter folks who are possessed by sorrow or fear or anger. So often I experience people possessed by an unclean spirit of greed and pride. More than I ever wish to see I experience people who are in the grip of addiction or captive to a past that will not let them go. What about you . . . what do you need to be set free from today?

Jesus has come to oppose the forces of evil which would rob the children of God of all that God hopes and intends for them.

And where they have taken possession of your spirit or are speaking loud lies into your heart this very day Jesus says, “Be Silent – and Get Out – You have no place here.”

Here – in God's kingdom. Here – in this place. Here in the heart of a child of God.

Dear friends, you have been set free by the power of Christ to live in the kingdom of God – and work for the kingdom of God - to bless, rather than curse; build up, rather than tear down; encourage, rather than disparage; promote love, rather than sow hate; draw together, rather than seek to split apart.

So let's get to work. For like the poison ivy in my back yard – the powerful, pervasive – and deep – forces of evil that are at work in the world are not going to go away easily – but with diligence and attention – oh and wait – we have Jesus – with Jesus – all things are possible. Thanks be to God. Amen

Stand and join together in claiming the power of God at work in our lives to oppose that which tries to rob us of all that God hopes and intends for us . . .

Baptism – renunciation.