

JESUS VS DEMONS

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Mark 1:21-28

They say you can't judge a book by its cover. That may be true. But movies, I would argue, are different. You can tell a whole lot about a movie from its title, especially if the title contains the word *versus*. If the title of a movie is "One thing versus another thing" then you know what that movie is all about. There's going to be a fight. The only question is who wins and how do they do it. Most of your versus movies are not going to win a Golden Globe for best screenplay. They tend to be simple affairs such as King Kong vs Godzilla. In fact, any monster you can think of has been in a movie versus Godzilla. Apparently, he's very popular. Also popular are ninjas, zombies, vampires, and aliens. Pair up any two of these and I guarantee they've made a movie about it. If you are a fan of horror movies than you know about Freddy vs Jason. If you prefer monsters from other planets there is an entire franchise of movies called Alien vs Predator. Not all versus movies are so low-brow. The Tom Hanks comedy Joe Versus the Volcano was pretty good back in 1990. And 1979, Kramer vs Kramer won five Oscars. Versus movies go all the way back to 1936 with Wife vs Secretary starring Clark Gable, Jean Harlow, and Myrna Loy.

If our reading today from Mark's gospel were to be made into a movie, its title would have to be Jesus vs Demons because it is nothing less than a public showdown between the forces of good and evil.

The story takes place early in Mark's gospel—in the first chapter. In fact, this encounter is the first time that Mark shows Jesus in public performing a deed of power. Things moved quickly in Mark's gospel. Chapter one tells us of John the Baptist, Jesus' baptism, Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, and the arrest of John the Baptist. Then Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee and calls the first four disciples. That brings us to our reading today where Jesus preaches in a synagogue and tussles with a demon.

After calling the four fishermen to join him, Jesus makes their first stop in Capernaum. Capernaum was an important city at the northern end of the Sea of Galilee. It was central in the lake's fishing industry and was probably the home of several of Jesus' disciples.

On the Sabbath, in Capernaum, Jesus and his disciples go to the synagogue to teach. The ordinary order of worship in a synagogue would have been prayers and praise, then the singing of psalms, the reading of scripture, and then the teaching or interpretation of that scripture. At that time, they would not have had ordained preaching clergy so the worship duties would have been shared among the

congregation. When available, itinerant preachers would be invited to lead worship. Jesus appears to be one of these.

In worship, Jesus interprets the scripture and the people are astounded at his teaching. The way Jesus taught was different than what they were used to. Typically, interpreting the scriptures involved quoting the long tradition of what the rabbis had said about that passage. “Rabbi so-and-so says this, Rabbi so-and-so says this.” But Jesus was different. He taught with authority.

While Jesus is interpreting the scripture, a man appears in the synagogue. This man possesses *an unclean spirit*—a demon. We do not know if the man entered the synagogue while Jesus was speaking, drawn there by Jesus’ presence. Or was he already in the synagogue and Jesus’ teaching causes the spirit to reveal itself. Either way, the spirit compels the man to make three statements: *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.*

The first statement, *What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?* is not the best translation. The original phrase is an idiom and difficult to translate directly. The sense of it would be, “Why are you picking this fight?” Today, we might put it, “Why are you getting up in my face, Jesus?” Clearly, the demons are concerned with Jesus’ presence.

The second question is, *Have you come to destroy us?* By us, as we've seen in other places, evil spirits often run in packs. We've read about people possessed by multiple spirits at one time. We are now in Jesus vs Demon territory. The fight is on. The demon wants to know what Jesus’ intent is. The demon is aware of Jesus’ power. As we go through Mark’s gospel, we’ll see Jesus exercise his power over numerous other unclean spirits.

The spirit then identifies Jesus saying, *I know who you are, the Holy One of God.* The people may not know Jesus’ identity, but the demons do.

Then Jesus casts the spirits out of the man. And he does it in an unusual manner. Scholars have studied the ancient descriptions of exorcisms and they all employ complicated rituals and formulas. But not with Jesus. He uses a simple command, *Be silent, and come out of him.* No flailing his arms, no magical incantations, just a simple command—“out.” The unclean spirit exits the man, causing him to convulse and scream. The people in the synagogue are amazed at what they witness—even the unclean spirits obey this man.

Finally, Mark informs us that news of Jesus began to spread throughout Galilee.

When we sit down to read the Gospel of Mark, the first thing we’ll find are these words: *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God.* Mark makes

it clear that what he is writing is *good news*—an opportunity for the oppressed to break free from whatever chains are holding them back.

The first public miracle Jesus performs is to demonstrate his command over demonic forces. He can control them. He can cast them out. They obey him. For those afflicted by dark forces, the arrival of Jesus is something to celebrate. The demons, however, see it differently. Did you notice who starts this fight? Jesus does. The unclean spirits are minding their own business when Jesus invades their turf. “Why are you getting into my face?” they want to know.

You may or may not view demons as creatures living around us, but I believe we will all admit there are demonic powers in our world. These are the forces of evil that trap people and deprive them of hope, that deny them freedom, chaining them down saying, “you’re not going anywhere.”

When Jesus began his ministry, he didn’t go straight to Jerusalem. He started in Galilee. He should have headed for Jerusalem which was the home of the great temple, the seat of all power. Galilee was a place that the people in Jerusalem made fun of. It was the sticks. But Jesus goes there and plants the seed for the kingdom of God. The soil was good because those seeds took root.

Imagine a young person today who has just graduated from college with a degree in public policy. They have ideas and passion and want to fix the system and improve people’s lives. Logically, this person should head for Washington, D.C., the seat of government. They should get a job in the West Wing or on a congressional committee or in a policy think tank—a place where they are doing the heavy lifting. But no, this young person moves to Watertown. Instead of taking an influential job in government this young person gets a job at the coffee shop and spends time talking to people in town and learning what their problems are. The young person helps get these problems fixed. The family that can’t get their water turned on to their trailer finally get water. The woman who wants to start a business but can’t get a license, gets the license plus a small business loan. The veteran who has been denied benefits starts getting checks. This young person uses their knowledge of government—their authority—to repair flaws in the system, to introduce hope to those who feel trapped by powers greater than their own, to bring healing.

Healing, that is what Jesus does. In his gospel, Mark records eighteen separate miracles of Jesus. Of these eighteen, thirteen center on healing.

In our current world, we've been following with horror the story out of California of the thirteen children tortured and chained to their beds for years by their parents. Do these children recognize demonic forces? You know they do. Or, we have watched the news of the dozens of young gymnasts systematically assaulted by the team’s doctor. Because of his power over them, they were trapped. Or this week, another school shooting just up the road from here in Benton, Kentucky—two

students killed, eighteen wounded. This is the eleventh gun-related incident on a campus in our nation this year. And by this year, I mean 2018—January, less than one month—not the school year. As a parent, this is terrifying. We do all we can to keep our children safe, but feel trapped in a system of potential violence that is beyond our control.

The list of demonic forces is endless. It includes mental illness, addiction, disease, sexual abuse, racial hatred, poverty, injustice, and more—any place where people have been denied power.

The good news is that a power greater than the powers of evil have entered the system. Where there was only darkness, there is now light. Where there was despair, there is now the promise of hope. Where there were chains, there is now the whisper of freedom. As Jesus exclaims, *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near.*

To further describe what this kingdom offers, the next three events after the synagogue show Jesus bringing change to the desperate. He cures a woman of a fever, he heals a man of leprosy, he enables a paralyzed man to walk again. Through this gospel, Mark demonstrates time after time Jesus' power to change lives and bring healing.

As Christians, we should lift our voices in praise that Jesus is with us fighting the demons of our world. As disciples, we must also dedicate ourselves to shattering the chains of injustice, to bringing healing to the broken, to offering hope to those who are trapped. It is Us vs Demons. Amen.