

Mk 3:20-35

In the Name of God: Creator, Liberator, Redeemer. Amen

Jesus-Stronger than the Strong-Man

Accusations are flying!

Tension fills the air.

Like a scene in a modern-day paparazzi convergence, crowds are so completely engulfing Jesus and his disciples that they can't even manage a meal together.

His mother and siblings attempt to free him from the chaos; but it seems that Jesus doesn't want to be saved *by them*. He coolly rejects their 'offer' of rescue.

Into the middle of this family drama,

Mark inserts the surreal Parable of the Strong Man.

I've oft been puzzled by this.

What's his purpose for the intrusion?

What does 'plundering the strong man's house' got to do with Jesus' family coming to restrain him, amidst reports that "he has gone out of his mind?" (v. 21)

The accusations being hurled at him offer a clue.
So does that nagging, pesky question,
about the one and only “*unforgivable* sin”
that issues forth from Jesus.

What exactly is Jesus accused of?
Demonic possession, strange as that may seem.
Leading up to this, he’s been busy casting out demons;
healing demoniacs (those possessed by evil spirits)
and performing exorcisms.
That’s good news for those who are healed,
for those freed from the bondage of ill foes,
released from the captivity,
by that which binds them up and holds them down.

But no good deed goes unpunished.
The religious authorities are not pleased.
They’ve noticed a dent in their business.
Order and control is slipping from their grasp,
because of His good works.
Jesus is the thorn in the side of the establishment.
He’s the fly in their ointment.

How best to knock Jesus out of commission?
By drumming up suspicion about Him.
Spin on it on ancient twitter.
Rather than pretend to no avail that He has no power,
why not cast aspersions over the *source* of His power?

The Jerusalem scribes formally charge
that he casts out demons by the power of Satan,
a serious violation punishable by banishment or execution.

(NIB, Vol. 8, p.563)

Now let's be reasonable for a moment.
Casting out demons by the power of the demon king?
It makes no sense.
That would be like inviting an intruder into your home,
then handing him the rope to tie yourself up.

The spin-doctors suggest that Jesus is possessed,
that he's acting out of his mind.
It caused me to wonder,
when his family shows up to rescue him,
how much of it was about saving Jesus?

Or in an honor-shame culture,
was there an added motive?
Was his family responding to outside pressure,
to save their own face, their own skins,
protect their own reputation.
Were his brothers willing to pay the cost for His behavior?

But Jesus isn't crazy. He's outraged!
Fed up at how the people suffer by the hands of others,
particularly their own leaders!
It is to those who have charged that he casts out demons
by the power of Beelzebul (Satan)
that he pronounces *the only unforgiveable* sin,
“Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins
and whatever blasphemies they utter;
but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit
can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.”

(v. 28)

This isn't a generalization to be cast around without care.
It is particularly applied to those who are saying
that Jesus is operating under the power of evil –
that the Holy Spirit is satanic.

“For they had said, ‘he has an unclean spirit.’
That accusation boiled his blood!

In truth, many saw him as out of his mind,
because he ruptured cultural assumptions,
splitting religious tradition apart at the seams.

Mark defines those who ally with Jesus and his cause,
who wish to see God’s kingdom become reality as ‘*inside*’;
while Jesus’ opponents stand ‘*outside*.’

Mark paints this picture with the mealtime scenario,
literally and metaphorically.

Those in opposition remain outside of the house,
even his well-meaning family,
who are presumably acting out of love on His behalf,
But no matter who it is, if they stand in the way,
impeding God’s work, Jesus’ work,
then they are opposing God’s will;
and Jesus tells us, “whoever does the will of my Father,
are my mother, sisters, and brothers.” (Mt. 12:50)

It is into this moment,
in the thick of all this accusation and division,
that Mark injects the Parable of the Strong Man.
The denouement arrives when Jesus points out the absurdity
of *casting out demons by the power of demons*.

Jesus is not working on *behalf of Satan* but *against* Satan.
Jesus has come to destroy the ‘strong man’
to ‘plunder the strong man’s house’ - not the house of God.
Jesus is the *stronger* strong man.

The strong man’s not a dude with horns and a pitchfork!
It is the power of evil in all of its manifestations:

- Racial Supremacy and Xenophobia
- Inequality in all aspects over gender and identity
- Materialism and Capitalism over poverty
- Militarism and Nationalism over humanity
- Able-bodiedness over disability
- And dangerous ideologies

Those are the powers that bind up the kingdom of God.
Those powers are strong, but God is stronger!

Again, I say, Jesus is the stronger strong man!
He ties up the strong man and sets the captives free.

Where is the strong-man operating in your life?
Where is your house divided?

We may be tempted to despair,
to concede that the strong-man is gaining,
on us, on God.
But that is why His Resurrection gives us hope.

In C. S. Lewis’ Chronicles of Narnia, the first volume
(Vol. 1, The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe)

Aslan the lion representing Christ,
sacrifices himself to save Edmund.
He offers himself in trade, innocent for traitor.
Aslan is bound and executed by the evil White Witch.
She thinks she has prevailed.
She believes that she is the stronger one.
But Aslan believes the deeper magic will prevail
And, He lives again, restoring Narnia to new life.

Jesus believed in the deeper magic of God.

Do you believe in the deeper magic of God?
Do you believe that He lives again,
and is in the *process* of restoring all things,
to inherent goodness, created from the beginning.
Do you believe that Jesus pardons the sinful,
and sets the captive free,
all who are bound-up by the strong-one?

I believe that Jesus knows the depths of our hearts
and knows where the demons dwell.
I believe that He casts them out,
that he may dwell within us, in that beautiful Holy Spirit.
I believe that we are liberated from the forces
that conspire to squeeze the breath of God right out of us.
Jesus bursts them apart at the seams.

Exorcism isn't a thing of the past, biblical fabrication.
I suggest that we're on guard by faith;
vigilant against the one who would set up housekeeping
in our homes, and our bodies.

Why else would we continue to utter these words
in our baptismal vows,
“Will you persevere in resisting evil, and,
whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?”
And how do we respond?
“I will with God’s help!” (BCP, 304)
We live into this belief, that Jesus is,
the stronger strong-man in the power of the Holy Spirit.
Jesus gives us the strength *we* need
to face down the strong man.

As Jesus’ family and friends learned the hard way,
and as followers of Jesus, we too will undoubtedly
experience, to stand with Jesus comes at a cost.
We stand with the prophets no less,
who throughout the ages have paid the premium.

I’ve come to know Howard Thurman,
a modern-day prophet, whose vision moved,
“toward a fundamentally unchained life
available to women and men everywhere
who hunger and thirst for righteousness, especially-

- those ‘who stand with their backs against the wall.’
as he wrote in *Jesus and the Disinherited*.
Jesus stands with all whose backs are ‘against the wall.’
But eventually... there will be no more walls.
No one standing outside,
for all will be within the kingdom of God. Amen.
Amma Susan+