

**Reason to Believe: Christianity and Radical Evil**  
**LaGrave Christian Reformed Church**  
**August 30, 2020- Outdoor/Livestream Service**  
**Reverend Peter Jonker**  
**Mark 1:21-28**

There's an interesting dynamic in our society. On the one hand we modern western people are more secular than ever. That means we don't explain our world with reference to spiritual causes. We explain our world with reference to scientific and psychological causes. In a secular society, things happen because of people's choices and because of physical processes. The spiritual dimension of life is mostly ignored.

And yet our secular culture produces characters like the Joker. The Joker is a villain in the Batman comics and the Batman movie franchise. The most famous big screen version of the joker was the one portrayed by Heath Ledger in Christopher Nolan's movie *The Dark Knight*. Ledger won an academy award for his portrayal. Ledger's joker was more than a villain; he was like an embodiment of chaos. Most villains have an agenda. They want to steal a pile of money and get rich. They want to destroy an enemy so they can rule the world. Heath Ledger's joker has no agenda. He simply wants to sow terror and fear. His crimes are designed to send the city onto panic. His crimes are designed to get people to turn on each other. As Michael Caine's character Alfred says in the movie: he just wants to watch the world burn. Here's how the joker describes himself in the movie: *"Introduce a little anarchy. Upset the established order, and everything becomes chaos. I'm an agent of chaos..."* *"Do I really look like a guy with a plan? You know what I am? I'm a dog chasing cars. I wouldn't know what to do with one if I caught it! You know, I just... \*do\* things."* He's against purpose. He's against order.

You could explain this Joker in biblical terms: In Genesis one, God creates order out of chaos. He moves over the formless void and makes a beautiful creation. The joker wants to go back to the void. He wants to go from order back to chaos, from light back to darkness.

Most of you know that Heath Ledger's joker caused something of a stir when he appeared on the scene. People were fascinated by him. He was horrifying, but he was also compelling. He drew your attention. I would argue that the reason he drew people's attention is that the joker had *spiritual resonance*. The joker *spoke to the neglected spiritual dimension of life*. In this case, the joker was an effective representative of the dark side of spirituality; he was a representation of evil. The Joker was a vivid depiction of a death-dealing force that everyone senses in this world but whose name people have forgotten. Secular society struggles to comprehend evil. It doesn't have the language; it doesn't have the categories to talk about the darkest stuff in our world. When we are in a secular mindset we think that the problems of the world can be solved by good advice and better policies. If we all just followed these 10 steps to a happy life and if our

government would put the right policies in place, we could solve society's problems and live happily ever after! Of course, as Christians, we are all for good policies, good advice and happily ever after. But there are problems in this world, and there are problems *in us*, that will not be solved by good advice and good policies. There are spiritual forces in this world that will not be defeated by diet and exercise. There is a darkness that won't be overcome by positive thinking and tax cuts.

We all sense this. Remember how we felt after 9/11? There was a spiritual weight. The horror of this thing that had happened. This weight of a hatred that wished us harm. It felt like chaos was crouching at our door. Commentators and thinkers tried to explain, tried to fathom the weight of hate that led to this act and they found that secular explanations fell short. Old spiritual words like evil were the only words that fit. Or do you remember how you felt after Sandy Hook, when all those children were slaughtered in Connecticut in the middle of a school day? I remember the Sunday morning afterwards. I remember getting up to lead the service and feeling a weight, not just in me, but in the whole congregation. There was a heaviness, a dread, a feeling that we had seen something...evil.

And it's not just out there in the terrorist acts and the massacres; we sense that force working in us. Have you ever been so angry that it takes you over? You are so furious that it sweeps you up and you say something or do something, and later you look back and say, "How could I do that! I don't know what came over me?" Or have you ever wrestled with really strong temptation. Addicts know what this like, but it's not just something addicts know. Have you ever been in the grip of such a strong temptation that it keeps coming back to your mind over and over again like a kind of torment that you can't escape? In both these experiences, the struggle can't simply be described by regular scientific or psychological categories. It is a spiritual struggle, and we feel that in our heart and soul.

Here is where Christian faith has a better account of the world than secularism. Our faith takes evil seriously and it shows us where our hope lies when this death-dealing force shows its face. Biblical faith gives a deeper, a better and a truer account of life than the secular world. In the Bible, sin isn't just an accumulation of bad choices, or a result of a poor childhood, it is a dark force that sets itself against the things of God. You see it right from the beginning. Remember the story of Cain and Abel? Cain's anger at his brother Abel is starting to get the better of him. He's walking around with his face downcast, stewing about his brother. God comes to him and says, "*Why is your face so downcast? Watch yourself Cain. Sin is crouching at your door and it desires to have you.*" Do you see the picture of sin here? God doesn't warn Cain against breaking a rule; he warns him about an evil force that is crouching at his door and wants to have him. This is also how Paul sees sin. For Paul, sin is not just a collection of individual misdeeds, it's a crouching force that enslaves our heart. And when Jesus saves us he doesn't just tidy up our mistakes, he breaks the stranglehold that evil has on our heart and soul. Colossians

1:13 “for he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the son he loves.” This is not a makeover. In Christ, we are new creations. In our passage we see that Jesus has come to do battle with this evil force that menaces the world and menaces our hearts. Our passage is the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry in Mark. From 1:21-39 Mark shows us one day of ministry for Jesus, and many commentators think that Mark put this day of ministry at the front of his gospel to give us a sense of Jesus’ ministry priorities. Jesus teaches in the synagogues, so using scripture he instructs the people. Proclaiming the kingdom of God—preaching—is an important part of his ministry. Jesus heals Peter’s Mother in law and many other sick people who come to him. Healing is an important part of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus also comes into conflict with evil Spirits. He casts an unclean spirit out of a man who confronts him in the middle of his sermon. In the evening after sunset, verse 34 says he drove out many other demons. Confronting the evil one, battling the evil one, destroying the power of the devil is a central part of Jesus’ ministry.

These encounters with the forces of evil run through the whole gospel. In Mark 1:13, even before this synagogue encounter Jesus has been wrestling with the devil in the wilderness, undergoing temptation. In Mark 3, Mark 5, Mark 7, and Mark 9 Jesus has more encounters like the one in our passage, where he ends up throwing demons out of people. In Mark 6, when Jesus sends out his disciples, Jesus gives his disciples the authority to cast out demons. In Mark 8, when Peter tries to get Jesus to reject the way of the cross, Jesus says “Get thee behind me Satan.” This is not a minor theme. This is not a story here and there. This is a central theme of the book. Jesus came to defeat the powers of evil. Jesus came to bind the strong man. Jesus came to speak a word of hope and power against those dark forces that still haunt our secular dreams, that still menace our society and our hearts.

By the way, this is also how the catechism portrays Jesus’ work. ‘What is your only comfort in life and in death? That I am not my own, I belong to my faithful savior Jesus. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood and has tidied up my misdeeds’ ... wait that’s not right... ‘he has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.’ The tyranny. Of the devil.

If you’re watching out there today and you are not a church person, if your mind and your instincts have been trained by secular institutions, all this talk of demons and the devil and the forces of evil probably sounds weird to you. I get that. But look in your heart and I believe you will know the reality of this struggle. Think how all cultures produce and all human beings are drawn to stories of good versus evil. Think of the appeal of Harry Potter, the Marvel franchise, and The Lord of the Rings. Think of Game of Thrones. Think of all the fantasy literature out there. We are drawn to this stuff because we know that there is a struggle in this world between light and darkness, between good and evil, and we sense that struggle is going on in every human soul including ours. And we know that this struggle for our souls is the central struggle of our life. *“I am not the person I should be! Who can help me become the person I am meant to be?!”*

Jesus can. Jesus can do that. Our Bible passage tells us about Jesus' first conflicts with the forces of evil, that conflict will continue throughout his ministry and it will come to an apocalyptic climax on Good Friday. On the cross, Jesus will do battle with the evil one. He will, as our creed has it, descend into hell. He will let death swallow him, he will let evil think he has won, only to rise on Easter morning and announce his *victory* over sin and death and hell. With one hand Jesus deals a mortal wound to the power of the evil one, and with the other hand he takes hold of his beloved children and refuses to let go.

I want to close this sermon with some good things that happen to us when we realize that there is a deep struggle between good and evil in this world and that Jesus has already won the struggle. First, when terrible and dark things happen in this world or happen in you, you are not completely overwhelmed. You don't despair. You know what human beings are capable of. You understand how evil can twist a human soul, and when it happens you know where your help comes from. So even when things are really dark or really terrible, you have hope.

Second, and this is related to the first point, you don't panic and overreact in the face of evil and end up causing more evil. This is one of the devil's main plays. He gets us to panic so that in fighting evil we end up causing more evil. When I took swimming lessons they always said, never try to rescue a panicked swimmer by grabbing them yourself because in their panic they might drown both of you. The panicked swimmer wants life, but her panic brings death. And so it is when we see evil spreading in this world. We see bad things, REALLY bad things happen, and we start to flail. We take wild swings at the forces of evil or what we think are the forces of evil. We start swinging because we think we are the only hope to make things right and we end up making things worse. I was reading Colossians for devotions this week and I was struck by 1:11. This comes right before the verse I quoted earlier, the one where Paul says that Christ has rescued us from the dominion of darkness. And what kind of life does the Spirit create in us when we have been rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of the Son he loves? Here's what verse 11 says, "Being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might..." there you can hear the cosmic victory over the evil forces... "may you have *great endurance* and *patience*." So not great warriors who wield this mighty power and win great triumphs; endurance and patience. People who get up every day and who know the new life they have in Jesus, people who take hold of the promises of God in the midst of life's complications and who go out in the world and live in the love of Christ day after day after day. Thanks be to God for the victory we have in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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