

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, JANUARY 28, 2018,
AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

Bill Gates dies and goes up to heaven where he is met by God. "Well, Bill," said God, "I'm really confused on this one. I'm not sure whether to send you to Heaven or Hell. After all, you enormously helped society by putting a computer in almost every home in the world, and yet you created that ghastly Windows. I'm going to do something I've never done before. I'm going to let you decide where you want to go."

Bill replied, "Well thanks, God. What's the difference between the two?" God said, "You take a peek at both places briefly if it will help you decide. Shall we look at Hell first?" "Sure," said Bill. "Let's go!"

Bill was amazed! He saw a clean, white sandy beach with clear waters. There were thousands of beautiful men and women running around, playing in the water, laughing and frolicking about. The sun was shining and the temperature was perfect. "This is great!" said Bill. "If this is Hell, I can't wait to see Heaven."

God replied, "Let's go!" and so off they went to Heaven. Bill saw puffy white clouds in a beautiful blue sky with angels drifting about playing harps and singing. It was nice, but surely not as enticing as Hell. Bill Gates thought for only a brief moment and rendered his decision. "God, I do believe I would like to go to Hell." "As you desire," said God.

Two weeks later, God decided to check up on the late billionaire to see how things were going. He found Bill Gates shackled to a wall, screaming amongst the hot flames in a dark cave. He was being burned and tortured by demons. "How ya doin', Bill?" asked God. Bill responded with anguish and despair, "This is awful! This is not what I expected at all! What happened to the beach and the beautiful women playing in the water?"

"Oh THAT?!" said God. "That was the Screen Saver."ⁱ

Sometimes the demons are not where we think they will be. That was certainly the case in Jesus' day, where he encountered them everywhere, even in the synagogue when he got up to preach and teach. It used to be that public figures could get up to give a speech without the fear of interruption. Nowadays that is not the case: from the President on down, the demons

get up to speak, and they have a message: “what have you to do with us? Have you come to destroy us?” Sometimes demons are present in folks we know. We even whisper in acknowledgment “ah - he has many demons, you know,” and thus we often forgive them their folly.

In the *Gospel of Mark*, Jesus encounters many demons in every day folk – sometimes as many as 10,000 of them, as if it were a set-up, warning the hearer of the story that they have not seen anything like the dangers that yet lie ahead, where the true devils will show themselves (as they do with the religious authorities, and in Judas, Pilate, and Herod.) That a man with an unclean spirit would have been allowed into the local synagogue, where everyone supposedly knew everyone else, is strange. Probably it was not the first time he had acted out in public; and besides, there were no guards to keep him from coming in and being present. In any case, where there is a speaker coming who has a lot of authority among the crowds, one can always be sure that there will be someone or something that will rise up to challenge the authority. You’ll notice that the man does not have a name, yet he knows Jesus’ name and title and seeks to have authority over him by calling him out. This naming game is very old; think of the story of Rumpelstiltskin; once the young boy in the fairy tale knew his name, he was able to free himself and take all the ogre’s treasure. That Jesus performs a kind of exorcism here makes us uncomfortable, though some churches, like the Roman Catholic Church, do believe it is possible to cast demons out through this means. Mental health advocates are strongly opposed to the notion that evil spirits can be cast out in this manner, encouraging us who know so little about mental illness to be more open to what causes it and how it is to be treated. But the writers of Jesus’ day have little patience for such spirits, believing they needed to be confronted wherever they were found. Hence we see part of the agenda of the gospel writers, particularly Luke, who bases his gospel on the writings in *Mark*. For Luke, a Gentile writer unfettered by the history of the oppression of the Jews, authority, and just who will have it in the end, is a major focus. It matters not if it is an unclean spirit or a religious despot - in the gospels, Jesus will have authority over all the major forces of the day (it is God’s will, after all), and what prevails will be the good news of God, in Christ, as it does in this simple story of possession in *Mark*.

It’s not surprising that the people were amazed, not that Jesus had done one of his so-called “miracles,” for many had been following him and drawn to the synagogue to hear him speak and teach, hoping that he might do something spectacular. What they seemed particularly amazed about is the authority by which he does so: he speaks with authority, he heals with authority, and they are intertwined. It is this same kind of authority that he gives to the disciples when he sends them out to preach the Gospel, that is, spread the good word, and to heal those they come in contact with. The speaking of the Word itself - - no ritual, no incantation, no liturgy, just retelling the story Christ has given them, is all that the apostles need to do the work Jesus has given them, all the work Jesus has called them to. Did their amazement cause the people to believe in Jesus? In most cases, it did. After Jesus drove out the

unclean spirit, “the report of (Jesus) went out immediately everywhere into all the region of Galilee and its surrounding area.” Now the word was out, and there would be an awful lot to live up to. Now the people, the crowds, would want a miracle every time he encountered them. But Jesus tries to downplay all of this. Just as he told the spirit to “hush up,” if you will, he encourages the disciples to say very little about what has happened. In *Mark*, it’s called his Messianic secret, a motif by which Jesus is portrayed as commanding his followers to maintain silence about his Messianic mission and to not reveal to others that he is the Messiah. It was a kind of literary tool used to heighten the drama of the story, but it gets confusing at times. Why if everyone could see that he was special did Jesus not want folks to know it? Would not the miracles themselves help bring people to belief? Certainly those who experienced the casting out of the demon believed, or else they would not have spread the news. And it could not just be a matter of pride on Jesus’ part. Why not let the world know, at this early part of his mission and ministry, just what he was there to do? Obviously, therefore, he had a plan and a timeline, and the way he would parse out the miracles he performed was part of it. Perhaps he had to establish sufficient authority to stand before the Pharisees and Sadducees and the other religious figures, and to face Rome in the guise of Pilate and Herod. Whatever the case might have been, he goes about his work deliberately and quietly, casting out demons along the way if it suits him (which it seems to as there are more whom he encounters in the verses and chapters of *Mark* ahead).

This gospel wants us to remember that the entire question of authority is key to our relationship with God. In the gospels, the writers go to great lengths to show us who should be in charge in our lives, but the authority of God, as exercised in Christ, is meant to be salvific, not punitive. In other words, God uses authority to help us, to save us, to aid us in our daily lives and works. We are meant to learn that if we would grab a little of said authority by interacting with God in prayer and praise, we would save ourselves a lot of heartache. For would not God, who is the author of all things, have knowledge of and wish to share with the Creation the keys to success and a happy life with us? I know that sounds a lot like the Prosperity Gospel of preachers like Joel Osteen, but where I am in agreement with him (and them) is that I believe God wants a relationship with us, and that God will use whatever is at God’s means to attract our attention and to sustain us in our beliefs.

Let me put it another way. There’s an old Native American story about a chief instructing some braves about the struggle within. “It is like two dogs fighting inside of us,” the chief told them. “There is one good dog who wants to do the right and the other dog wants to do the wrong. Sometimes the good dog seems stronger and is winning the fight. But sometimes the bad dog is stronger and wrong is winning the fight.”

“Who is going to win in the end?” a young brave asks.

“The one you feed,” the chief answered.ⁱⁱ

The writer and preacher Jeffrey K. London says that “the only food available to feed the good dog within us comes from above, it comes from outside of us, it’s the food of hope and grace whose singular nutritional authority comes from God. We do not have the power to overcome evil on our own. In fact, left to our own devices we will choose evil more often than good.”ⁱⁱⁱ That is why we must recognize and give ourselves over to the authority of God in our lives. If not, evil will always come knocking, and we will surely let it in. The power of God is stronger than all else, and deserves a place on the mantel of our hearts, our minds, our faith, and our works. Praising God is how we should begin every day, as it puts us in a right relationship with God, and keeps the line straight and the walls secure for what the day offers.

God constantly offers us an invitation, a call to be one with God. Because if we are one with God, nothing else can enter that relationship and that unity with God is what will make us whole. Let us leave a place for God in our hearts and in what we do on a daily basis. It may mean the difference between living a full life or encountering daily our own little hell. Mac users – it looks as though you are in good shape! The rest of us need to open up our Windows for a breath of fresh air, and pray that God will find a way to shine through our panes/pains (however we spell the word!).

Amen.

(The Rev. Dr.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr.
Pastor, BBCC

ⁱ <http://jokes4all.net/angel-jokes>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.sermonwriter.com/sermons/mark-121-28-a-question-of-authority-london/>

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*