

Sermon for: Trinity Lutheran Church; 4th Week after the Epiphany; January 27, 2024

Sermon Text: Mark 1:21-28 (Gospel Reading)

Sermon Title/Theme: The Battle for the Soul

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Athletic events are often promoted as “battles”: the Iowa/Iowa State games are more than a routine contest. They are a “battle” for state bragging rights. This weekend’s NFL football playoffs are a “battle” for the division championship and the opportunity to go to the Super Bowl. The IKM vs. Manning games of decades and generations ago were more than another game. They were a battle.

Today’s Gospel account of the healing of the man with an unclean spirit, can be portrayed as a battle. It is a spiritual battle between Jesus of Nazareth and Satan. It might be promoted as, “The Battle for the Soul.” The battle for the soul is not a once a year contest. It is a daily struggle. That battle is not between two teams. The spiritual battle is a personal encounter that involves every one of us. It’s not a battle that gets national headlines. It’s a battle that quietly goes on in the hearts and souls of each of us. It’s not a battle for a temporal trophy. It’s a battle for an eternal victory at the throne of Jesus.

Welcome to the playing fields of Jesus’ ministry and the spiritual battles in the lives of Jesus’ followers.

Part I. The battle between Satan and Jesus

During this Epiphany season we continue to focus on the earthly ministry of Jesus. Today’s Gospel lesson takes us to Capernaum, the base of Jesus’ Galilean ministry. Jesus has been baptized in the Jordan and tempted in the wilderness. He begins to call and teach His disciples. Jesus is not allowed the privilege of easing into the revelations of His being and His work. Mark notes the intensity and urgency and he frequently notes the pace of ministry with “immediately.” Today’s Gospel lesson states, “And immediately there was in the synagogue a man with an unclean spirit.” The One who had battled Satan for 40 days in the wilderness is again engaged against the evil one.

Satan comes to the playing field with a long history of contests and a record of many victories. The first contest was played in the Garden of Eden. Envious of that perfect image of God that Adam and Eve possess, Satan deceives them to destroy the perfection of the garden and their relationship with their Creator. Satan seems to win the game. Adam and Eve succumb to the trick plays and find themselves defeated, embarrassed, and dying outside the Garden. Satan assumes that this is the one and only battle. He assumes that he has forever won over the souls of Adam and Eve and their descendants.

But God, the loving, gracious, and rescuing God, promises another battle and sentences Satan, "I will put enmity between you and the woman . . . I will crush your head." God intervenes to redeem and rescue His creation. The Messiah, the Rescuer, will be sent to and through God's people.

A doubting, wandering people doubt God's promises and plan. Evil kings erect other idols. Satan continues to accumulate the victories. Jesus comes to the playing field out of the glory of heaven. The Son of God, comes as true Man so that He might enter the contest. Jesus joins our team in the battle against Satan for the souls of humanity. If Satan is to possess the souls of mankind, he must stop the mission of Jesus. The game plan is simple. Satan and Jesus each see the goal line. Who will win the battle for souls?

Mark had summarized the first contest, "Jesus was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan." Gospel writers Matthew and Luke both give more details of that game, with Jesus using the weapons of the Word to thwart Satan's attacks. Satan goes away—only to return. Jesus begins teaching and He is immediately interrupted by the unclean spirit, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" (Mark 1:24) The contest is a short one—one play. Jesus speaks, "Be quiet, and come out of him!" and the unclean spirit came out. One game is done. But the season of temptations and confrontations goes on. In this Gospel Mark tells us of other challenges: Jesus meets a demon-possessed man living in caves. Jesus drowns the demons with a herd of pigs. A boy

is brought to Jesus who cannot speak because of demon possession. Jesus completes the “regular season” of His earthly ministry undefeated.

All those contests set the stage for what will become the Super Bowl of salvation between Jesus and Satan. The foes confront each other not on some manicured grass field with evenly divided cheering crowds. The game of salvation is played on a rugged and rocky hill called Calvary. The vocal ones jeer the One whom they perceive to be their opponent with cries of “crucify Him!” Satan engages Jesus again in the Garden of Gethsemane discouraging Him from being faithful to His Father’s will. Jesus experiences the abandonment of His disciples and His Father. Satan speaks through the unrepentant thief, “Save yourself and us.” Jesus cries “It is finished!” and dies. Satan is on the sideline laughing and lifting the trophy . . . for three days. But there is one final play that leads to lasting victory. Jesus rises from the dead. He descends into hell to proclaim His victory over Satan.

The battle for the souls is won. The victory is there for all who see and believe in this Jesus. Jesus who had won a regular season game in Capernaum claims the Super Contest in Jerusalem. Jesus’ team, our team, wins!

Part II: The battle continues; the victory is sure

Are there still battles for the soul? Do we find ourselves on the playing fields of life skirmishing with the devil?

Several years ago, the research of George Barna indicated that 75% of today’s teens think that the devil is only a “symbol” for evil and not real. The truth of 1 Peter 5:8 apparently had not been heard and believed, “Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, hold firm in your faith.” Satan doesn’t appear to us as he did to Jesus in Capernaum. He doesn’t come identifying himself and acknowledging Jesus as the Son of God. Satan doesn’t come in a red costume with a pitch fork and a mean smirk. Satan comes subtly. Satan comes in the weakness of our

flesh; he comes raising faith doubts and reminding us of our guilt; he comes in the tempting Web sites and the sexual suggestions of print and screen; he comes in the sinful suggestions of our peers. Slowly and silently Satan sneaks in to claim our souls. Satan suggests that worship is unimportant and the church is irrelevant. Satan comes in the complacency of our minds and our culture's suggestion that there's many roads to salvation or that there's plenty of time to repent and renew a relationship with God. When Satan appears it is not some casual back-yard game. It's a battle for your soul.

The Lord who came to earth and the Lord who revealed his authority over Satan at Capernaum is still Lord. The message of the Epiphany season is that we are in the season of Light and the prince of darkness has been driven away and defeated. Epiphany is celebrated not only in the anticipation of the Lenten and Passion journey, but in the reality of Easter. The responses of the service of Holy Baptism include the questions: "Do you renounce the devil? Do you renounce all his works? Do you renounce all his ways? Together we as parents, sponsors, and the church respond for the baptism candidate and for ourselves, "Yes, I renounce him." Then in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit Satan is drowned and the reality of Jesus' resurrection and our new life in Him is ours. For the baptized child of God it is a super day with implications for every day.

Assured that Jesus' victory is ours, His powerful word becomes our word, "Be quiet Satan!" "Go away Satan!" Jesus' authority over Satan becomes our authority over Satan.

In the Hymn of the Reformation, Martin Luther celebrates,

"Though hordes of devils fill the land all threatening to devour us; we tremble not, unmoved we stand; they cannot overpower us. Let the world's tyrant rage; in battle we'll engage, His might is doomed to fail; God's judgment must prevail; one little word subdues him." One little word of God sends Satan away shrieking again and again.

Who will win this weekend's football games or the Super Bowl in two weeks? Who will win the high school or college basketball games and advance to conference or other championships? While we are entertained and certainty have our "favorites," the contests are yet to be played and the outcomes are undecided.

Who will win the "Battle for the Soul"? That outcome has already been reported. Jesus won, and His victory continues to be ours. What a contest! What a victorious Epiphany Lord! Amen.