

**A sermon preached by Rev. Jason Cashing at
Clarence Presbyterian Church on June 9, 2024.**

BINDING THE STRONG MAN

<1 Samuel 8:4-20; Psalm 138:1-8; Mark 3:20-35>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

Not far removed from Pagosa Springs, in southern Colorado, a person can find themselves feeling not just a mere two or three miles removed from civilization, but worlds away. In the Weminuche Wilderness, there are hundreds of miles of trails one can walk and go days without encountering another individual. And in the summer of 2004, as I and a group of classmates hiked a small percentage of those trails, this was the truth: for the week we were in the Weminuche Wilderness, we saw no other people. This sense of isolation, of removal from the distractions and demands of the world, was heightened for us when, camped in a meadow along a stream, we were sent out for our “solo camp” - thirty-six hours in which we were encouraged to camp under a plastic tarp, and engage the monastic practice of hermit devotion. We did not sit with one another, we did not eat with one another, we were engaged completely in solitude.

The good and the bad of such a time is that you are alone with your own thoughts, and alone with God. As the hours go by, the two seemed to me to be in tension; a tug-of-war over my very spirit. Was I going to be focused on all the cares of my life that I could not stop thinking about, though I could do nothing for them? Or was my focus and attention going to be on developing and nurturing my relationship with the Divine?

While you might be able to guess which of those realities I wanted to live into, the reality on that trip in the summer of 2004 was that I was not able to silence the distracting thoughts in my mind, the fears, doubts, and insecurities that had seeped into my spirit. After the first sleepless night on my own, I packed up my gear and headed back to the main campsite where our guides and trip leader were camped, feeling defeated.

The “strong man” is at work in our world, but more so than that, the strong man is at work within each of us. But what is, actually, the “strong man”? That’s a question that does not have a simple, or clear-cut answer, but it does have an answer. In Mark’s gospel, the answer is somewhat more straightforward, particularly in the context of the conversation between Jesus and the scribes of this morning’s reading: the “strong man” is understood to be Satan, who seeks to rule this world and all its inhabitants. Jesus, then, is refuting the scribes’ allegation that the only reason Jesus can drive out demons is through the power of the demons themselves. “How can Satan drive out Satan?” Jesus asks. “A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand.” Shifting the allegory, Jesus proclaims that before a house can be robbed, the strong man must first be bound. Satan must be overcome in order for the powers of Satan to be exorcised from the world.

That said, for our sake today I would offer a broader application and understanding of this “strong man.” And the perfect example of this understanding can be found in our reading from 1 Samuel.

The people of God are restless. They have, at last, entered into the Promised Land after years of travel in the wilderness. During that time, they learned - the hard way - how to draw close to God and recognize the presence of the Divine in their midst. They became, more fully, God’s people, and now they have entered into the land toward which they traveled - physically and spiritually. But now that they are there, now that they are settled, they have become distracted by the demands, needs, and cares of the world around them, and how they fit in to that world. And they have come to a conclusion: they need a king, a singular authority to rule and guide them.

Do you sense, yet, what the “strong man” is in this context?

The people of God want a king to lead them, so they go to Samuel the prophet and demand as much. Samuel is perturbed by this development. Last week, we read of the call of Samuel to be the next prophet, essentially replacing Eli and Eli’s sons as the spiritual intermediary between the people and God. Eli’s sons have gone astray with earthly concerns, desiring acclaim and comfort, and Eli has watched passively as this has happened. God raises up Samuel, calling him to service before Samuel even knew who God was, in order that there would again be a spiritual guide who was close to God. And now the people want a king. Samuel is perturbed.

But God reassures Samuel. “They have not rebelled against you, they have rebelled against me. Therefore go and do what they request, but tell them what will happen and that it will not meet their needs.” Samuel counsels that a king will not be the answer the people are looking for, but they are resolute, and so with God’s provision, Samuel proceeds.

Did you see the “strong man” at work?

Perhaps another example will help. I’ve mentioned before how I’m privileged to be in conversation and learning with other clergy around the country, and in other denominations. For all our geographic and denominational differences, there is much that we all have in common. Clergy, it turns out, are a group that is highly prone to comparison, meaning that we tend to look at how good a colleague is doing over there in their particular context, and then think that we ourselves are not measuring up. That we should be doing something more, something different, something better, and that if only we could be like our colleague then ministry would sky-rocket in effectiveness.

Or perhaps you’re a mother, who has looked at other mothers, thinking they have it all figured out and put together, and you’re just not measuring up. Same goes for fathers. Or colleagues within your profession. As they say, “the grass always looks greener on the other side of the fence.” And in recent years social media has skewed that dynamic even further into a misrepresented reality; we always put the best, and only the best, on social media, often ignoring the struggles or the truer realities at play.

Surely, you now see the “strong man” clearly, the presence which would distract us from God and demand an undue amount of our attention and energy. The dynamic at play which would inhibit us from living out the ministry to which we are not only called but eminently equipped with every gift and talent needed. It can take many shapes and forms, it can manifest in any myriad of ways, but at its core, the “strong man” is the dynamics of this world which keep us from focusing on the dynamic presence of God.

And while the strong man was, in Mark’s reading, specifically noted as Satan, who is also often referred to as the Prince of Earthly Things, the more general understanding - especially for us today - could be “anything that focuses our energy and attention unduly on worldly realities instead of God.”

And this “strong man” must be bound and overcome, if we are to be faithfully effective in proclaiming the good news of the gospel.

The people of Israel want a king, not because they think a king will more effectively lead and direct them than a prophet, but because they see their neighboring countries who have kings. And rather than be a people set apart by God to live a different way, proclaiming a different possibility, they want to be like their neighbors.

I, and my colleagues, look at one another and rather than focus on our particular gifts from God, and the particular ministry to which we are called, we let ourselves think, ‘if only I could do what *they* do then I would be successful.’

We look at other mothers and fathers, other colleagues in our professions or friends, and think, ‘if only I could do what they do, or have what they have, then it will all work out and my problems, my struggles will cease to exist.’ As they say, the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence. But in truth, it’s the same grass, just a different fertilizer, and what works there may not work at all over here.

In the summer of 2004, I was unable to set aside my distractions and place myself fully in God’s presence. Thankfully, after a year of mindfully refocusing my attention and seeking to be aware of God’s presence and gifts, on the same trip in 2005, in almost exactly the same spot, I was able to be fully present with God, and not defined by my distractions, fears, or insecurities. I was able to overcome that particular strong man. It was rejuvenating and life-giving.

We are faced, each and every day, with the strong man which seeks to distract us from God’s presence and God’s call on our lives. We often determine our success on earthly, transient distinctions rather than the marks of faithfulness and communion which God offers and which Jesus exemplifies. In the beauty of this day, in the presence of all creation and in the midst of one another, let us put aside our earthly distractions, even briefly, and refocus our hearts and minds on who God is, who we are in the Divine Eye, and who we are called to be in the Kingdom of God, here and now. Amen.