

Introductory

This text has a parallel in Luke (4:31-37), and the two readings are very close, as far as synoptic parallels go. Neither of those texts is appointed to be read in the TLH one-year lectionary. Both are appointed to be read in the three-year series in the new hymnals. On Epiphany 4B and 4C (Luke 4:21-32) in LW. In LSB as well, the Luke (4:31-44) text is to be read on Epiphany 4C.

Demon possession is not something most Americans often think about. Most never think about it in the least, and if those thoughts should somehow find their way into the mind, they can quickly be cast out by thinking other more pleasant thoughts. Probably a lot of Americans have thought it through and have concluded and taught by the experts that mental illness exists, but demons don't.

To be sure, we don't observe a whole lot of people possessed by demons in Christendom, but it happens. The movie *The Exorcist* was based on the true story of a young man named Roland Doe, a son of German Lutheran immigrants. A twelve-year-old named Arne Cheyenne Johnson used a "The Devil Made Me Do It" defense when put on trial for killing his landlord. He was convicted.

When I was in SWD beginning in 1985, there was a "haunted house" in the next town over, lived in by a LCMS family. One of their pastors talked about it at Winkel, and it was a very real thing. Probably the people who had lived there had dabbled in satanism, and invited Satan into the house, and the demons refused to leave. I think the story finally ended with tearing down the house.

Capernaum is no longer there, but it has lately been extensively excavated. The building that is the setting for this pericope is located under a second synagogue, one which is still standing, built on the site of the first one. The building next week – Peter's House – is located a short distance away under two Christian churches built on the site. You can find them both on Google Maps.

Textual Notes

21. Right before this, last week, we found Jesus walking along the shores of the Sea of Galilee, from where He calls the four fishermen to get behind Him. That takes place close to Capernaum, and then after that calling, Jesus and the pair of brothers now with Him "εἰσπορεύονται εἰς Καφαρναούμ – they go into Capernaum." This was their home turf, with which they were familiar.

They go to town, and “τοῖς σάββασιν εἰσελθὼν εἰς τὴν συναγωγὴν ἐδίδασκεν – on the Sabbath, He went into the Synagogue and He was teaching.” The Sabbath begins a few minutes before sunset on Friday, and at least some modern synagogues these days hold a Friday evening service. The main service is on Saturday morning, and Sabbath lasts until just after sunset on Saturday.

The synagogue was modeled after the Temple, and generally had a main space for worship and other various and sundry rooms for things like – whatever things you have need of at church. Whether or not His teaching took place in the context of the service or whether it went beyond that is not clear. What is clear – and this is the point – is the response of the hearers to the speaker.

The Lutherans tend to make a sharp distinction between preaching and teaching. Preaching is seen as something done from the pulpit with a focus on proclamation, particularly the proclamation of Christ crucified. Teaching is seen as something done in a classroom with a focus on teaching and learning more about the Christian religion, particularly things other than the teaching of the cross.

Actually, preaching and teaching are essentially the same thing. Both contain proclamation and both contain teaching, including preaching Christ Crucified and other things as well. When I taught in a Lutheran High School, I proclaimed the Gospel all the time in the classroom. When I write a sermon, I always write with a mind to what I can and should teach the hearer in the sermon.

The rallying cry for the LCMS – and the theme of our last national convention – has become Paul’s claim that he preaches Christ, and Him crucified. But Paul never says he preaches *only* that, and we observe that he says a lot of things in his preaching – and especially in his writing – that are not about the cross. In fact, it’s his preaching of the Resurrection that Acts finds most noteworthy.

If you look at that same man’s inspired instruction to Pastors Timothy and Titus, he tells them to preach and teach about a lot of things, including “the full counsel of God.” I fear we may be breeding a new generation of Gospel Reductionism to go along with the Neo-Legalism we see creeping into our church body, and all of it in the name and under the moniker of “confessional.”

It does not say here what is the content or the methodology of the teaching of Jesus here. But we can reasonably concur that it was similar to His teaching recorded in other places in the NT. Was He telling stories here, like He tells stories recorded in those other places? Was He using figures of speech, like He uses figures of speech in those other places? No doubt, He talked about God.

22. Mark indicates here that the Scribes did at least some of the teaching at Capernaum. At its base, the vocation of Scribes (Sofer) was to copy documents, and their duties may have involved other things as well. Their role in making copies of the OT and other theological writings would have familiarized them with those documents, something of a prerequisite for teaching them.

It may be a good idea to remind the hearer about the days before the copy machine. For most of human history, the copying of texts has been done by hand. For big runs, you could make a template that you could use to print the same page over and over again. And then, in about 1440, Johannes Gutenberg invented the movable type printing press, and “movable type” is the key.

We stayed a couple of days in Mainz a few years ago. There is a statue of Boniface in the square outside the Cathedral, and the Gutenberg Museum is just down the street. You can see that printing press and its movable type in operation, and the Viking River Cruise crowd gets narration while they watch. We learned all one ever needs to know about printing at that place on that day.

Movable type means that you had individual letters and the like that you can move around to different boxes on the template, thereby spelling different words. You didn’t have to carve a new template for every page and when those pages were done that template became garbage. He even figured out a way to make different sized letters, so as to justify the text, like Word does now.

People in those days probably didn’t normally think critically about the teaching of the Scribes – until Jesus came along. When Jesus began to teach, “ἐξεπλήσσοντο ἐπὶ τῇ διδασκίᾳ αὐτοῦ - they were astonished at His teaching.” The verb is the one that only occurs thirteen times in the NT, and the writers reserve it to express the most extreme form of surprise; they were all gob smacked.

Which part left them gob smacked? Was it what He said, or was it the way He said it? It’s a noun, so it was mainly the content – the doctrine – that caught their attention. His content was the same as John’s content, and people travelled to hear John preach (as well as to receive his baptism.) It included things like repentance, the Gospel, and apocalyptic preaching about the “Kingdom.”

As we read through the preaching of Jesus later on, we see that He continues to preach on those and other topics. His preaching is apocalyptic, and He does compel the hearer to repent, and He does proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom. They heard His words, and they were gob smacked because “ἦν γὰρ διδάσκων αὐτοὺς ὡς ἐξουσίαν ἔχων – He taught them as one having authority.”

The hearers noted the same thing when Jesus had finished the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:28-29). You know how you listen to some people, and after not too long you conclude that the person doesn’t know what he’s talking about? Like the last IDE Pastors Conference, for example. Jesus was the person who – after not long – you conclude that this man knows His stuff, and well.

We journey back to the first century, when Classical Rhetoric was all the rage, and Aristotle’s Three Modes of Persuasion were part of the Grammar level of learning for public speaking. The

first mode of persuasion is ethos – we would call it credibility or something like that – people have to know that you know what you’re talking about before they will listen to you talk about it.

There is in this world nothing more riveting than listening to somebody who knows what he’s talking about, do that. You don’t have to be taught or told to listen. When it comes to good teaching, you can’t turn away. Of this, Luther says “All was full of life, and sounded as though it had hands and feet.” Compare and contrast, “καὶ οὐχ ὡς οἱ γραμματεῖς – and not like the Scribes.”

Knowing what you’re talking about means more than just knowing theology and even just knowing the Bible. The Scribes knew those things, they knew factual things, and they were probably pretty good at trivia. Jesus knew things about God, and knowing what you’re talking about extends to knowing how to take what you know and put it into words that can be understood by the hearer.

I’ve been at my current charge for eleven years, and by now I’m old hat. Back when I was doing pulpit supply and vacancies, it was not uncommon for people to come out of church and tell me that “I can understand what you’re saying” as if that was an unusual thing. Maybe it is. Here, it is clear that the people understood what Jesus is saying, and perhaps we should strive to do that.

They flocked out into the wilderness to hear John, and the teaching of John was very easy to understand, as are the teachings of Jesus. Actually, far from being the hard to understand book that many perceive it to be, the perspicuity of the Bible is perspicuous. To be sure, it helps to know the languages and something about language and communication, and that’s what Seminary does.

23. While the hearers were busy being gob smacked, there arose a commotion, “εὐθὺς ἦν ἐν τῇ συναγωγῇ αὐτῶν ἄνθρωπος ἐν πνεύματι ἀκαθάρτῳ, καὶ ἀνέκραξεν – and then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out.” The man is not identified otherwise, except to say he has a demon. You wonder how common that was, a man like that at synagogue.

In the NT, there are two kinds of spirit; the Holy Spirit and the spirit that is not at all holy, but from Satan. The NT often uses the word “demon” to refer to what Mark here calls the “unclean spirit.” Probably none of us have ever been witness to such a thing, but we see Jesus encountering them all the time, and they are still common in many parts of the world and increasing in ours.

Demons do not like the Word of God, and are particularly put off by Jesus, the Word became Flesh, like we see here. Speaking of knowing things, James observes that demons know factual things about Jesus, and He scares them, and he distinguishes such knowledge from faith in Him. In places where the Word is prevalent – like America – Satan and demons don’t want to hear it.

Neither do they want to hear groups of people gathering together to sing praises to his mortal enemy, God. It’s a big world, and they can very easily travel to other places where they will feel more comfortable. Missionaries talk about how they often run into demons and demonic activity, and our own Robert Bennett has written a book, *I Am Not Afraid*, and it’s a very good read.

24. The man has a demon, and he knows Jesus, and he knows Him well. Was this the point of reference for James? Note that it is the demon, not the man, who is “λέγων Τί ἡμῖν καὶ σοί, Ἰησοῦ Ναζαρηνέ – saying, what to us and to you, Jesus of Nazareth.” The first word is a singular participle, the man is “saying,” and the pronoun “you” is plural, inquiring between Jesus and “us.”

Continuing with the plural, the demon accuses, “ἦλθες ἀπολέσαι ἡμᾶς – you come to destroy us?” The verb “to destroy” is an aorist infinitive. Then he switches back to the singular, “οἶδά σε τίς εἶ, ὁ Ἅγιος τοῦ Θεοῦ - I see you who are the Holy One of God.” The verb indicates the perception of sight, and more than just seeing, it indicates a great level of understanding what you see.

Where the singular is indicated, the singular refers to the demon, not to the man. The demons know all about Jesus, and knowing about Jesus, “they tremble.” The demon is doing all the talking here, using the man’s mouth, an unfortunate by-product of demon possession. By using the plural, the demon seeks to identify the man as an enemy of Jesus, with him to be destroyed by Jesus.

25. In response, it is the demon to whom Jesus speaks unpleasant words, “καὶ ἐπετίμησεν αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς Φιμώθητι καὶ ἔξελθε ἐξ αὐτοῦ - and Jesus rebuked him, be silent, and come out of him.” In the NT, you rebuke someone when you are at odds, and Jesus is for sure at odds with the demon, using imperatives to first command the demon to shut up, then commanding him to get out.

26. When the command of Jesus is given to the demon to shut up and get out, the demon has no choice but to immediately do just that, obey the commands of Jesus, “σπαράξαν αὐτὸν τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἀκάθαρτον καὶ φωνῆσαν φωνῇ μεγάλῃ ἐξῆλθεν ἐξ αὐτοῦ - the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out in a loud voice, went out of him.” That must have been something to behold!

The verb “convulsing” is used only three times in the NT, and all of them are used in connection with what happens at the casting out of demons. The cry of defeat is also something often found when a demon is commanded to leave. When Bennett talks in his book about cases he has seen of demons being cast out, the scene often looks and sounds a lot like the one here sounds and looks.

27. This all played out in public, and the people who witnessed it “ἐθαμβήθησαν ἅπαντες – all were astonished.” That very rare verb occurs only three times in the NT, all in Mark (the others are in 10:24 and 32), and all three times – including here – the word refers to His words, not His actions. So astonished were they, “ὥστε συνζητεῖν αὐτοὺς – as a result, they discussed together.”

While His words of teaching astonished them, the fact that He could use words to cast out a demon was not lost on them, “λέγοντας Τί ἐστὶν τοῦτο; διδαχὴ καινὴ κατ’ ἐξουσίαν – saying ‘what is this teaching, and this authority?’” They have noted the thread running through this entire incident; the connection between teaching, Word, and the Word’s power to do things like defeat demons.

They note, “καὶ τοῖς πνεύμασι τοῖς ἀκαθάρτοις ἐπιτάσσει, καὶ ὑπακούουσιν αὐτῷ - and the unclean spirits...He commands, and they obey.” These days also, Bennett says, people note the power of

the name of Jesus to cast out demons. That word is able to do that every time and without delay; immediately. There is a remarkable consistency between that time and the present in that regard.

28. Word about this incident got around, καὶ ἐξῆλθεν ἡ ἀκοή αὐτοῦ - and the news of Him went out,” as if it were a living thing with movement because it is. But the report of this incident did not just dissipate to other places. People heard about this incident by hearing words from other people who were using words. In the Christian religion, that’s always how people learn of Jesus.

And the story had legs, going out “εὐθὺς πανταχοῦ εἰς ὅλην τὴν περίχωρον τῆς Γαλιλαίας – immediately, everywhere into all the surrounding areas of Galilee.” Everybody who know what they’re talking about know that Christianity spread very rapidly when it was first introduced, the same way it spreads very rapidly these days when it’s introduced to people who haven’t known it.

Take Hawaii, for example. When the missionaries came, the people eagerly embraced this new religion that did not require – for example – human sacrifices. Or Papua New Guinea – for another example – where I heard one summarize it best, saying “we used to kill each other a lot. Not we don’t kill each other as much.” Not so much in America, where our religion is underappreciated.

If we understand demonic possession to have been common in that time and place – and it was – we ought not to think that the casting out of those demons was in any way a routine matter. Normally, the demons would have their way with people, like they do in those areas today where they rule. Jesus comes along, and everything changes. He is God, and He is able to defeat Satan.