



CHRISTIAN CRUSADERS

7401 UNIVERSITY AVE., CEDAR FALLS, IOWA 50613

(319) 277-0924

INFO@CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG

WWW.CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG

Epiphanies: He's Our Champion!

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Rev. Steve Kramer

TEXT: Luke 4:31-37 (ESV)

And he went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee. And he was teaching them on the Sabbath, and they were astonished at his teaching, for his word possessed authority. And in the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, "Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent and come out of him!" And when the demon had thrown him down in their midst, he came out of him, having done him no harm. And they were all amazed and said to one another, "What is this word? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out!" And reports about him went out into every place in the surrounding region.

A few weeks ago, I was listening to a friend who was describing for me his gloomy outlook on life. He said, "Some days I don't even want to get out of bed." I guess I can understand – that there are some days it feels like the world's getting worse and spinning out of control, and that evil's winning and all is doomed. Who wants to face it? You follow the news and it can wear you out and bring you to despair. I recently read a fascinating article in *Wired* magazine about that entitled "'Doomscrolling' is Slowly Eroding your Mental Health." It read as follows:

So many of us do it. You get into bed, turn off the lights, and look at your phone to check Twitter or the news one more time. You see that coronavirus infections are up. Maybe your kids won't be able to go back to school. The economy's a problem. Still, you incessantly scroll through bottomless doom and gloom news and sink into a pool of despair. This habit has become known as

“doomscrolling”, the act of consuming an endless procession of negative online news. And according to a survey from the Pew Research Center, 66 percent of Americans are feeling worn out by the amount of news available. Recently, Dictionary.com named “doomscrolling” one of its new words we created because of coronavirus, there's something else in the etymology, though, particularly in the word “doom”. This “doomscrolling”, then, is to roll toward annihilation; taken biblically, it has a revelational tone. Simultaneously, each person watches the demise so much while also slowly destroying themselves.

The article concludes:

Doomscrolling will never actually stop the doom itself. Amidst all the pain, isolation and destruction of the past months, it's not worth it to add on to the strain with two hours of excess Twitter every night. Try these things instead: put down your phone. Turn off the news notifications and focus on some good news to lift your spirits.

Well, today in this story about Jesus, we have some good news that is meant to lift our spirits. Jesus was teaching in Capernaum at the synagogue. People recognize something unique about his teaching: he didn't teach like the rabbis, who quoted other rabbis and the opinions of others. Jesus taught with authority instead, like one who knew God personally, who maybe was even the author. Well, there was someone else who recognized this as well that day: a demon. Suddenly, in the midst of Jesus' message, a man who was possessed by a demon, an evil spirit, shouted out, “Hey, you, what have you got to do with us? Have you come to destroy us? We know who you are – the holy one of God.” Here we see Jesus being recognized by the demon as uniquely set apart – that's what holy means – for service to God; that he's the messiah anointed by the spirit of God. Jesus spoke as he was confronted. “Shut up. Come out of him.” Guess what? Immediately, the demon threw the man on the floor and convulsions, and then he left him unharmed and the man was restored, free, just like Jesus had announced earlier in his hometown of Nazareth – that he had come to set the captive free. Here he had set an oppressed person free from Satan's hold on his life, and the congregation was absolutely shocked by this. They asked “What is this word for with authority and power? He commands the unclean spirits and they come out.”

There's an epiphany taking place in this narrative, a revealing of Jesus' identity and purpose – that he's God's champion come to fight. As I read this story, I'm reminded a little bit of the creation story. God said... and it was so. And in this episode, Jesus

says... and it is so. He tells the evil spirits to go and they go. There's no mumbo-jumbo or incantation or dancing around; just a simple command and they go. When Jesus acts to exorcise demons or cure diseases, both cosmic forces and diseases become subject to his will. Now, why is that? Well, because there's such power and authority in his words, is the case because as the demons recognized and declared, he's the holy one of God. The long-awaited messiah, sent from God who would exercise Kingdom of God authority have power over every evil thing he encountered. And we learned Jesus, as the holy one of God, has come to destroy evil, to do battle with Satan and set people free from his cruel and deadly hold on their lives. And that's exactly what took place that day in Capernaum.

Now, as a general rule, I wouldn't recommend that you base your understanding of Jesus solely on the words of an evil spirit; but ironically, what the demons shouted at Jesus was true. And Jesus, the Kingdom of God has dawned, shining its piercing, powerful light into the world's darkness. He was and is indeed the holy one of God, the Messiah, who came to destroy Satan, his works and his minions. And in this face off Jesus won. But it's just the beginning. He will win again and again and again, all the way to the cross, where he will complete his mission to make payment for your sins and mine, which was the last thing Satan wanted to see happen. That's why he was always tempting Jesus. As someone said, when Jesus was nailed to the cross, it was really Satan who got nailed. God's will was done that day. And Jesus rose from the grave, overcoming the power of death and all authority on Heaven and Earth has been given to him. Jesus is Lord. And if you belong to Christ, our Lord, then you've been redeemed. He has redeemed you from sin and from the devil and from death and from all evil, and he has made you his own.

Martin Luther, in his large catechism, put it this way: "Before Jesus, you and I had no lord and king, but were captive under the power of the devil, condemned to death and entangled in sin and blindness. But Christ has set us free to live under him in his kingdom and serve him. And he now keeps us safe. Nothing can snatch us from his hand." And I say, amen, that's good news... good news for us to stay focused on these days. That's what the Apostle Peter focused on is his good news as he testified to an Italian soldier named Cornelius with these words:

God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit, with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all that he did, both in the country of the Jews and

in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all people, but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that Jesus is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead.

He's our champion! This passage really is good news for you and for me as followers of Christ. Jesus is God's champion who has come to fight for us, and he has won! God has truly gone to great lengths to rescue us and make us his own by sending us Jesus.

Martin Luther wrote of this in his classic hymn, *A Mighty Fortress*,

A mighty fortress is our God, a sword and shield victorious.
He breaks the cruel oppressor's rod, and wins salvation glorious.
The old satanic foe has sworn to work us woe
With craft and dreadful might, he arms himself to fight
On earth is not his equal.
No strength of ours can match his might, we would be lost, rejected.
But now a champion comes to fight, whom God himself elected.
You ask who this may be? The Lord of hosts, is he!
Christ Jesus, mighty lord. God's only son adored.
He holds the field victorious.

He holds the field, the world, victorious. He is Lord.

There are some important applications there for those of us who trust in Jesus. You don't have to give in to negative and fearful thoughts and feelings as you observe the world around you with its problems and the evil that you see, because you have a champion who loves you, who has won the battle, who's in control, and he's always with you. And nothing can snatch you from his hand. You are safe eternally with him. And as far as the world in the future is concerned, both of those things belong to Jesus. He is Lord over all; he will judge the living and the dead. And in the end, all will be well. And we will be with him forever.

Now, there are two important things for us to keep doing while we wait for Christ's reappearing, in the midst of all we see in the world. First, keep your hearts and minds on Jesus, your champion, by reading your Bible every day, reflecting on what God is communicating to us through those spirit-inspired words. You read the gospels again and again for divine encouragement and direction. Memorize a Psalm or two like Psalm

23, or Psalm 121, so you can carry those words around with you in your heart and call upon them when you're feeling overwhelmed. Like this story for today, you see: there's power and encouragement in his words. Jesus will always meet you there to help and give you God's outlook on things, and give you a more positive outlook as his children, knowing that you are in his hands.

Second, commit yourself to be on the offensive. I'm not suggesting you become offensive, but what I am saying is: always be fighting the good fight for the cause of Christ, filled with Christ and Holy Spirit confidence and courage. Now is not the time for us to cower and complain about the darkness. We follow one who has overcome the darkness – Satan's defeated, we're in the midst of mop-up operations. So instead of cowering, by faith, let the light of the freeing gospel shine in and through you. That's what happened that day at Capernaum: Jesus did battle with darkness. We as a church are called to do the same – to walk in the footsteps of our champion. After Peter's confession of faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the son of the living God, Jesus made this promise to him: “And I tell you, you’re Peter, and on this rock, I’ll build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” That sounds like a battle call, going on the offensive, to Christ’s church. And he assures us that Satan does not stand a chance. So, may this spirit inspire us to break out of the prison of fear and timidity and instead live in a spirit of daring and courage in our sphere of influence through witnessing and serving others boldly in his name. We've been showing that in Christ, we're on the winning side, the stronger side, through faith in our champion Jesus. The story is God's word of encouragement, therefore, for us, the church, to keep boldly shining in the darkness of this world with good news – the good news of Jesus’ suffering and death and resurrection for us.

So, don't you appreciate this story, Christian? I do! Because let's face it, there are times when we feel as if the odds are stacked against us, and Satan and evil is winning as we strive to carry out the great commission that Jesus gave us – to make disciples of all nations. But here I'm reminded that I follow and serve a champion who has already won the main event and is with me and is for me, and he has equipped me with his Holy Spirit. This lifts me, you see, as I serve him. It not only reminds me that a spiritual war is going on, but it also gives me confidence and hope to fight the good fight for the cause of Christ Jesus, our lord. I can live each day counting on these words of reassurance from him. In this world, you will have tribulation, but take heart. “I have

overcome the world.” Carolyn Arends, a songwriter and author, tells this wonderful little story. She said,

As a kid, I found mission Sundays, when missionaries on furlough brought special reports in place of a sermon, I loved those Sundays. There's one visit I've never forgotten. The missionaries were a married couple stationed in what appeared to be a steamy jungle, and I'm sure they gave a full report on churches planted or commitments made or translations have begun. I don't remember much of that. What I do remember, what stayed with me, was a story they shared about a snake. One day they told us an enormous snake – longer than a man – slithered its way right through the front door and into the kitchen of their little home. Terrified, they ran outside and searched frantically for a local who might know what to do. A machete-wielding neighbor came to the rescue, calmly marched into their house and decapitated the snake with one clean chop. The neighbor re-emerged triumphant and assured the missionaries that the snake had been defeated, but there was a catch, he warned. It was going to take a while for the snake to realize it was dead. A snake's neurology and blood flow are such that it can take considerable time for it to stop moving even after decapitation. So for the next several hours, the missionaries were forced to wait outside while the snake thrashed about smashing furniture, flailing against walls and windows, wreaking havoc until its body finally understood that it no longer had a head. Sweating in the heat, they felt frustrated and a little sickened, but also grateful that the snake's rampage wouldn't last forever. And at some point in their waiting, they told us they had this mutual epiphany. I leaned in with the rest of the congregation, queasy and fascinated. “Do you see it?” asked the missionary husband? Satan is a lot like that big old snake. He's already been defeated. He just doesn't know it yet. In the meantime, he's going to do some damage, but never forget he's a goner.

The story still haunts me because I've come to believe it's an accurate picture of the universe. We are in the thrashing time – a season characterized by our pervasive capacity to do violence to each other and ourselves. The temptation is to despair. We have to remember, though, that it won't last forever. Jesus has already crushed the serpent's head.

I finish with this verse from that hymn *A Mighty Fortress*:

Though hordes of devils filled the land, all threatening to devour us.
We tremble, not unmoved, we stand. They cannot overpower us.

Let this 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.
And that little word is "Jesus."

Amen.