

The War is Over  
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Epiphany 4  
Mark 1:21-28

Grace, mercy, and peace are yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of my favorite games to play as a kid was tug-of-war. It's such a simple game but it requires so much of your physical strength to play. As custom, each team would have an anchor at the ends of the rope: most of the time that was the biggest kid each team had. As long as the anchor was set, it didn't matter how everyone else was placed. The obvious goal of the game is for either of the teams to pull the other across a line. Sometimes, there might even be a flag attached to the middle of the rope for visual representation. I think the most entertaining matches are the ones where both teams are struggling to bring down the other. You can see struggling faces like this one or that being made while pulling. Kids on both sides can find themselves tilting at a 135 degree angle. And then there's that one epic moment where the team that pulls their hardest falls on their backs knowing that they've won the match. In the end, the hard fought victory is met with high-fives amongst the winning team.

You have probably heard it said that this game of tug-of-war is being played right now for our very souls. You have Satan and his forces pulling against God and His forces. For us Christians, it's obvious who wins: God. There's no way the Creator of the cosmos could ever be defeated by His own creation. Certainly, good must triumph over evil. We know this. We know how the story ends: God wins and all who believe in His Son Jesus wins! But sometimes it's hard to believe because it

doesn't appear to be that way in our own lives. Rather, this powerful God who created the cosmos can appear to be powerless in our everyday lives. Allowing us to succumb to the unwanted hardships of this life. Yet in today's text, we see otherwise. In the midst of our doubts and defeats, the God who created the cosmos comes to us in the most intimate of ways.

In our text today, the people in the synagogue were astonished to hear Jesus' teaching. He taught as one with authority like the Pharisees except he wasn't trained as one. Teachers of the Law were trained underneath the mentorship of their elders. So when they taught in public, they taught as their predecessors had. The idea was that their teaching ultimately came from Moses. Jesus, on the other hand, spoke with authority like that of Moses, possibly even higher, so you can imagine there were some eye-brows raised. Yet, people were captivated. They began to recognize that this Jesus was someone to watch out for. That something great was going to come from this man.

Then out of nowhere, this man filled with an unclean spirit came before Jesus to expose him of his identity, but at a word, Jesus called the spirit out of the man. There was a tug-of-war struggle there if you caught it in the reading. After Jesus had given the command, "the impure spirit shook violently and came out of [the man] with a shriek." Before this, Jesus had single handedly stood Satan down while fasting in the wilderness for 40 days. If he was able to overcome Satan in the wilderness, an unclean spirit would have never had a chance in the first place. In fact, the spirit was expecting to be destroyed. And mind you, all of this took place early in Jesus' ministry in order to show that even the dark forces submit to his will. That is power!

As his ministry continued to unfold, people from all over the region could not help but draw near to him and spread word about him because of what he can do and what he had proclaimed about the Kingdom.

The Israelites were waiting for Messiah, and Jesus fit the bill. He was powerful as demonstrated with his ability to exorcise demons. His teaching was authoritative as if he were presenting something new and intriguing. He restored people back to health through miraculous works. He was well regarded by many people within the Jewish community. Without a doubt, Jesus was the long awaited Messiah, a King of prosperity whose purpose was to set the people of Israel free from their captives. We probably would've thought the same thing, too, were we in their shoes: Look at all he's done! No one can deny the good Jesus has done throughout his ministry. It's as if everything he touched became gold! The Israelites were simply connecting the dots. In their midst, Jesus was the King who promised prosperity!

The funny thing about that statement is that we're on the other side of coin. We know how the story pans out. We know what is really meant of Jesus as Messiah, they didn't. We know better than the Israelites did while Jesus was among them. But, still, we seek from him prosperity. For example: *If praying means I'm going to get what I want, I'll do it. If attending church shows that I'm faithful to God, and I get something out of it, I'll do it. If singing songs about Jesus is going to bring me closer to God, I'll do it. It's all about me. If I can gain something, I will do it. Lord, shower me with your blessings!* As Christians we have this tendency to equate Jesus' victory with the victorious prosperous life. Think about the text for this sermon. The witnesses

there saw Jesus' power, and what did they do next? They spread news about him by word of mouth, and people caught on fast. Everyone wanted to hear and see him. People wanted to touch him.

But if you think about Jesus' earthly ministry as a whole, he didn't work his miracles on everyone. At times, there were some who approached him and he was willing to work. And then there were times when he chose to demonstrate his power on certain people. In spite of Jesus being selective, the people were still in awe, yes. But a lot of people who were in need of help did not receive what they wanted from Jesus whether that was healing, food, exorcism, or resurrection. In the midst of those who could not reach Jesus, his power seemed limited.

Martha, sister of Lazarus, said it best, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would have lived." We're guilty of having those same thoughts. *God, I have been so faithful to you why are you letting my mother die? Lord God, why are you having my children being taken away from me? God, why do I feel so alone? God, why aren't you helping me with my finances? God, my marriage? God, I'm so hungry. God, where are you? Why can't you snap your fingers and make everything alright? I know who you are and the kind of power that you have.* In the midst of our trials and temptations, Jesus' power seems to be so very small.

As I said earlier, we know how the Gospel story ends. Jesus was mocked and scorned by Roman officials. He was raised up on a cross for all to see. There was even a sign made for him above his head, "Jesus, King of the Jews." What victory can be found there? Jesus was left hanging in the midst of people on a cross, crushed.

You might even find that the words of Christ are very much your own, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

But his death did not defeat him. In fact, his death set out to accomplish what he wanted to do: reconciliation between God and man. Our victory over sin, death, and the devil is found in Jesus’ most powerful moment in all of his earthly ministry: the laying down of his life for all creation. God’s work takes place in weakness and in the mystery of suffering, yet it is so easy to miss when we are looking for something else. The beauty of the cross shows us that we are no longer bound by Satan nor by any of our worldly anxieties. Meaning, this game of tug-of-war has been won, there’s no need to keep playing. We know it. And so when it feels to you like God is losing, and Satan is winning, maybe in your marriage, maybe in your finances, maybe in your health, when you feel that tug of war, you can recognize that for what it is. It is Satan throwing lies at you, trying to convince you that he has power to defeat God, even though you know better. You know he has been defeated. No amount of suffering nor heartbreak can ever rob us of the joy that we now have in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The very God who created the cosmos comes to us in Jesus. He demonstrated what it was to have real power. Power to subdue Satan. Power to undo the curse of sin and death. Power to lay down his own life in weakness and suffering.

Now I’m not saying you should actively seek out suffering like a masochist. No, I’m saying in your suffering, in your weakness, in your hardships God is actively working. Working to shape and mold you. Working in you, so that you can continually be a light to others who might find themselves in similar situations. The

body of Christ is built up of many people, and all of us here are a part of it in order to build one another up. The body of Christ isn't made up of people who've "got it all together." In fact, it would be foolish to say so. We all have some brokenness, something we are all struggling with. And this isn't something we should be quick to hide. In fact, this is one of our greatest strengths that we can share with people with one another here and outside of these walls who are also broken. Bridges can be built from us to them. There's no need to play a game of tug-of-war with ourselves in this church, and nor with those outside. This body of Christ is one of healing and restoration. A place of refuge. This is what makes the body of Christ so powerful. We can have hope. We can have joy in the midst of our weakness because Jesus has redeemed us. We are his. Remember that, and share it lovingly with those whom you build bridges with, so that they, too, can share in our joy. Our calling is not just to share Jesus as the one who is almighty and powerful, although that is who he is, but it is to share with people, Jesus as God in the flesh who walked among us and continues to walk with us in love by way of the cross. As the body of Christ, let us stand in the midst of the world and proclaim boldly the risen Jesus as Lord and Savior.

In the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Now may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.