

Lectionary 10 B 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

June 6, 2021

Mark 3:20-35

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

Dear Friends:

If you have never heard of a 72-hour hold, consider yourself fortunate. A 72-hour hold is when someone is placed in a hospital for psychiatric care. Against their will. If a person seems to be a danger to themselves, or a danger to others, they can be involuntarily committed to a hospital for three days. 72 hours. In the United States of America, in the land of the free, no one can be held against their will without going before a judge. So 72 hours is the longest they can hold you in a psychiatric facility to medicate you and evaluate you without a court order. And this can't happen in America unless a person is a very dangerous threat to themselves or others. Not just making a joke. Not just liquored up on booze or high on marijuana. A person has to be in a severe mental health crisis and a grave danger to themselves or others.

You're fortunate if you have never been involved in such a thing. If it happens, I want you to know that every case I have been personally involved in ended well. The person got the help they needed, and in hindsight they would acknowledge that, but at the time they would not voluntarily accept psychiatric help. The stories I know personally have more-or-less happy endings. But it's not a drama that you want to be involved in, and you're fortunate if you have not.

In today's gospel, they want to put Jesus in a 72-hour psychiatric hold. *When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind."* The translation is ambiguous. It could be that his family was saying that he had gone out of his mind. Maybe it was the public, or maybe it was both the public and his relatives. But there's a perception that Jesus has gone out of his mind. And his relatives are taking action. They want to remove Jesus from the public realm. Where he is at minimum an embarrassment. And at maximum, a dangerous threat to himself and to others. In their opinion.

And his relatives are not alone. The group called the scribes is accusing him of madness. In their terminology, he is possessed by demons. The scribes are the elite literate group in a vastly illiterate society. They alone can read. They alone can write. They are influential and powerful. They are the lawyers, the experts, the professionals. And they are saying that Jesus is possessed by demons, or even worse, by the ruler of the demons.

So the point of this gospel reading today is that Jesus is perceived to be a danger to himself and to others. They did not have a 72-hour hold in first century Palestine. But that's what they want to

do to Jesus. Lock him out. Get him away from the public. He is out of his mind, he is beside himself. And this comes from his family. And from the experts.

So this gospel reading is very much about what happens when the activity of God is misjudged and is called evil. In this gospel reading God is present and is acting in Jesus of Nazareth. And some people are reacting and saying, “No, that’s not God. That’s Satan.” This gospel reading is about that self-deception, that falsehood.

Two commonly quoted bible verses are spoken by Jesus in today’s gospel. And in order to be properly understood, they need to be read in context. “If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.” Those words were borrowed from Jesus by a young Abraham Lincoln to describe the United States on the eve of the Civil War. It was very effective for Abraham Lincoln, but for a very different reason. The United States really was divided, and really did have a civil war. But in the gospels, Jesus is speaking sarcastically to his opponents about a non-existent hypothetical. Jesus has been performing exorcisms, driving out demons by the dozens or the hundreds. The accusation is that Jesus can only do that if he himself is possessed by an even stronger demon. So Jesus is being sarcastic. Why would the king of demons wage war on the other demons? That’s stupid. Satan isn’t that stupid. Nobody is that stupid. Except possibly for these clowns who are accusing him.

The other commonly quoted words of Jesus concern the “eternal sin” in this gospel, or the unforgiveable sin in Matthew’s gospel. Interestingly, Luke leaves that part out when he tells this story. This saying is also recorded in the Gospel of Thomas as saying number 44. Thomas— a gospel not included in our Bible— is purely sayings of Jesus without context or narrative. Number 44 says, “*Whoever blasphemes against the Father will be forgiven, and whoever blasphemes against the Son will be forgiven, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven either on earth or in heaven.*” What an interesting verse that is. Very Trinitarian, and yet *not* very Trinitarian. Okay with the father, okay with the Son, not okay with the Holy Spirit. This verse has inspired terror in anyone who thinks they may accidentally have blurted out the wrong words. I discourage anyone in the sound of my voice from thinking that they have committed this sin. There is plenty of evidence elsewhere in the Bible that this is not how God works. The gospel writers obviously don’t agree on what was said or if it was said. For his part today, Mark says that this is a case of people with the living, physical Jesus of Nazareth performing miracles right in front of their eyes, and out-and-out accusing him of being diabolical, of the devil, or the devil himself. So they want to put him in a 72-hour hold. Or the first century Palestine equivalent of a 72-hour hold.

Since I’m talking about psychiatry, maybe you’ve heard of the movie “Awakenings” or even read the book that it was based upon. It’s the true story of lethargic encephalitis, which basically turns people into zombies. And they would just sit like a statue all day every day in the institutions where they had been placed. In the 1960’s the neurologist Dr. Oliver Sacks found a medicine that overcame its effects, and basically brought these people back to life. Most of them after a period of four decades. Hence the name of the book and of the movie: “Awakenings.”

That's what Jesus was doing. He was setting people in Galilee free from the things that held them captive. Physical illness, injustice, isolation, oppression, fear, shame, exploitation, and demons (which might be related to what we now call mental illness.) Think of what a Covid vaccination means to you, and then multiply it by a thousand. Jesus announced that he was waging war on sin and evil, and that God's ancient promises were coming true, and that this was good news for people, for humanity. In today's gospel, Jesus is describing himself as someone who is plundering the house of Satan. *"But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered."* Jesus is the plunderer. We think of him as the Good Shepherd so it's hard to even read today's gospel and comprehend what Jesus is saying. Jesus the plunderer. Satan the strong man who lives in a big house. Like Pablo Escobar. And Jesus is capturing that strong man, and tying him up, and all the riches are being pillaged by those who have previously been terrorized and held hostage. Jesus is on the march.

"You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." [Matthew 16:18] The gates of Hades. The gates of hell shall not prevail against it. This is not high tea with watercress sandwiches. This is the storming of the Bastille, this is Frodo going into Mordor, this is Dorothy and Toto and the Tin Man and the Cowardly Lion and the Scarecrow and heading west to snatch the broomstick away from the one who has terrorized all of Oz. Jesus's own family— his own mother— say that he is crazy. So do the authorities. All the lives he has changed, all the victims he has liberated, all the awakenings he has done signify the activity of God, the good news of the kingdom. And the gates of Hades will not prevail. And the strong man will be plundered. And Jesus is building a church to do this with him. "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."

Is Jesus crazy? Is he out of his mind? Is he allied with Satan? We quickly say he is not. But if you're paying close attention, Jesus is a little more scary, a little more gnarly than we usually see in stained glass windows. He may seem to be a threat to others. He may seem to be a threat to himself. Our vocation is not to tame him, or to put him in a 72-hour hold. Our vocation is to listen, to see, to believe, and to follow. Amen.