

We're back to reading Mark. In our three year cycle of readings, the first year has a lot of Matthew. The third year focuses on Luke. But the second year, the year we're currently in is heavily into Mark. And John is mixed in to all three years. And John is especially heavy during the Easter season. So it's been a couple of months now since we've had Mark as our Gospel. But now Mark is back. And except for 5 Sundays in late July and August, and a couple of other exceptions, Mark will be the main Gospel we will hear on Sundays from now until the end of November.

And today in our Gospel lesson, Mark serves up an example of his most famous dish, the fabled "Marcan Sandwich." There are more technical scholarly terms: a Marcan inclusio, a Marcan intercalation. But sandwich works just fine. In fact, I like to think of it as a Marcan Oreo cookie.

Think about an Oreo. The standard version has two chocolate cookies with a creamy filling in the middle. And the cookies and the creamy filling play off of each other. The filling holds the cookies together. The cookies give structure to the filling which would otherwise be a gooey mess. And yes, they are different: the cookies are crunchy and chocolatey, the filling is a creamy vanilla. Yet both are loaded with sugar. So the cookies and the filling in an Oreo sandwich play off of each other, comparing and contrasting, with similarities and differences.

So the Marcan Oreo, or Marcan sandwich is a literary device Mark loves to use. Introduce topic A. Switch to topic B. And then come back to topic A. Highlight similarities and differences.

In today's Gospel, we start with mention of Jesus' family. Then there's opposition from the scribes. And then we go back to his family.

I'm not going to spend much time with the two cookies today. I preached some on Jesus' family 8 weeks ago on April 11. I talked about Jesus and his brothers, especially his brother James. But none of them were followers of Jesus until after his resurrection. During his ministry, Jesus' siblings seemed to be impediments to him.

That's what we see today. Jesus' family comes to stop him from doing his ministry. They think he's lost his mind. Who is he to heal people and cast out demons? It's embarrassing that their brother is acting that way—they want him to stop. They want to take him home. That's the first cookie.¹

And on the other side, the second cookie is Jesus refusing to meet with his family. He's not under their control. They don't get to call the shots. He in fact has a new family. His followers, anyone who listens to his teachings, Jesus says, are his mother and brothers and sisters.²

¹ Mk 3:20-21

² Mk 3:31-35

But in between these two family cookies, we have the creamy filling of another story. It also is about Jesus facing some opposition. But it's not from an embarrassed family. Instead it is opposition from religious leaders, some scribes, who issue a vicious attack.

We have no parallel to the scribes in our culture. The scribes were teachers and experts in the Jewish scripture and Jewish law. But they also from time to time would deliver legally binding opinions based upon that law. That's why the word is sometimes translated as "lawyers." But they weren't lawyers in our sense of that word. Really the closest we can come it to imagine some seminary professor who also had the power of a civil court judge. That's a weird combination. But that's the scribes.

And these scribes aren't the local yokels. They've come to Galilee from the home office in Jerusalem. These are the big dogs, the big guns, and they're gunning for Jesus. And they issue a high-caliber accusation.

First, they basically stipulate that Jesus is healing and casting out demons. They don't dispute that fact, which is fascinating. But they try to spin things by saying that Jesus is using the power of Beelzebul, the power of Satan to cast out these demons. Jesus, in other words, is in league with the devil, and he's using demonic power in his ministry.

So Jesus blasts back with some stunning arguments. He argues basically that it's absurd. Why would Satan give someone power to cast out demons? Demons do Satan's work—they're basically his foot soldiers.

And then Jesus uses the line famously quoted by Abraham Lincoln: "A house divided against itself cannot stand."

It's absolutely ridiculous, Jesus is arguing. Satan is not going to give anyone power to thwart the work of those demons who are working for Satan.

In fact, Jesus argues, there's only one way that Satan would even allow these demons to be cast out. And that would be because Satan was powerless to prevent it. That would be because someone stronger than Satan had incapacitated him or overpowered him.

Jesus says, point blank, "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."

The bottom line of Jesus' argument: I'm not in league with Satan. I'm fighting Satan. And I'm winning because I am stronger than Satan.

Now, quick detour. This talk of demons and Satan can make some modern folks rather nervous. For many in our modern world, such a worldview seems mythological and primitive. They would say that much of what the ancients would diagnose as "demon possession" we would probably label as "mental illness." And there's a fair amount of truth in this.

But how would Jesus approach such a person suffering from such a malady in the year 30 AD? Would it make any sense for Jesus to walk up to such a person and tell them, "What you really need is a full battery of psychological tests that will be invented 2,000 years from now along with a prescription for some psychotropic medication"?

Of course not. He would have to meet them where they are in their world view. And he would heal them in a way they would understand.

After all, you don't walk up to a baby and say, "I would like to spend some quality time interacting with you." No. Even the most erudite amongst us with advanced degrees will walk up to a baby and go, "Oozhy boozhy... Googoo gaga."

And you don't say to a toddler, "Young man, might I inquire if you need to retire to the lavatory and relieve your bladder?"

No, you ask, "Do you need to go potty?"

So Jesus is undoubtedly dealing with first century people in terms they can understand. And whether Jesus is curing them by casting out actual demons, or whether he is curing them by healing them in other ways, Jesus is still healing them.

I would say that we as 21st century people don't need to see the devil behind every malady and every disease and every bad thing that happens.

But on the other hand, I would also say that there is often a palpable sense of something evil in this world that transcends just the bad choices that individual humans make. In our baptismal service we say we renounce "the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God."³

And we also say we renounce "Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God."⁴ If God has made angels, and given angels free will, then it stands to reason that some of those angels may choose to oppose God.

I think there is much wisdom in C. S. Lewis's famous statement about the existence of demonic forces. He writes, "There are two equal and opposite errors into which (the human) race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. (The demons) themselves are equally pleased by both errors."⁵

Back to the Gospel. Jesus makes a strong assertion that his power transcends and overpowers the power of Satan.

³ BCP p. 302

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, Preface

And then Jesus talks about something that we've termed "the unforgiveable sin." It's a statement that makes a lot of Christians nervous. Have I committed the unforgiveable sin? Is there something I can do that will put me outside of God's ability to forgive me?

And the short answer is, if you're worried that you've committed the unforgiveable sin, then, by definition, there's no way you have **COULD** have committed it. If you're worried about it, even the tiniest bit, then you have nothing to worry about.

Jesus' opponents were equating God's work with Satan's work. So if you think that Jesus is healing people by the power of Satan instead of by the power of the Holy Spirit, you have got your wires completely crossed. You couldn't be more wrong. You're 180° off. To equate God's power and Satan's power is the biggest error you could possibly make.

If you equate God and Satan, it will be impossible for you to find forgiveness, because forgiveness involves recognizing God and turning to God, even just a little bit.

So if you believe in God, even just a little bit, you can't be 180° out of sync with God. You may be off by 179°, but not 180°. So if you're turning toward God, even a little bit, you cannot be guilty of blaspheming the Holy Spirit.

In Mark today we see Jesus facing nasty opposition from the scribes from the Jerusalem office who accuse him of healing through demonic power. We also see Jesus getting pushback from his own family who think he's out of his gourd and want to try to stop him for his own good. But Jesus isn't under the control of his family. And he certainly isn't under the control of Satan.

He is doing God's work on earth. And part of that work is bringing new people into his family. "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Thanks be to God for our loving Brother Jesus, who makes us part of Gods' family.

Thanks be to God for our mighty Lord and Savior Jesus, who brings us the gift of life.