

January 28

Today's lesson from scripture is lesson 3 in our 4 week focus on Recognizing and Responding to God's voice. In the first week we learned with Samuel that we must figure out how to recognize God's voice so that we can make ourselves available to listen to what God has to tell us. Last week we listened with Jonah and the Ninevites. From Jonah we learned that sometimes recognizing God's voice isn't really all that hard, but responding can be. Jonah recognized God's voice but was boldly disobedient even though he was by all accounts a godly man. On the other hand the seriously sinful people of Nineveh also recognized God's voice as Jonah delivered God's message and they chose to respond decisively and dramatically in obedience and yearning for favor.

Today and next Sunday we jump into the New Testament and take a bit of a different look at recognizing and responding to God's voice. Let's hear a bit from Mark's gospel.

Mark 1: 21-28

²¹ Jesus and his followers went into Capernaum. Immediately on the Sabbath Jesus entered the synagogue and started teaching. ²² The people were amazed by his teaching, for he was teaching them with authority, not like the legal experts. ²³ Suddenly, there in the synagogue, a person with an evil spirit screamed, ²⁴ "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are. You are the holy one from God."

²⁵ "Silence!" Jesus said, speaking harshly to the demon. "Come out of him!" ²⁶ The unclean spirit shook him and screamed, then it came out.

²⁷ Everyone was shaken and questioned among themselves, "What's this? A new teaching with authority! He even commands unclean spirits and they obey him!" ²⁸ Right away the news about him spread throughout the entire region of Galilee.

Today's example of recognizing and responding to God's voice is actually an unclean spirit or a demon. A demon that had come to church with a faithful Jewish temple attending person no less! A demon heard the word of God from God's own mouth and couldn't stand it!

I think we have to pause a moment and notice the casual way in which Mark talks about demon possession. This is not to be understood as someone who has no mind of their own and is inhabited against their will by some ghostlike entity that makes their eyes glow red or green or some suspicious color.

We might want to label this person as having a mental illness, and if they have had to share mind and heart with a spirit having weaseled their way in, then some measure of

mental illness is to be expected either as precipitating factor because perhaps some mental illness leaves a mind unable to shore up defenses against the devil and his demons or the person might have mental illness as we would call it after having been struggling against the demon that has overstayed its welcome.

And for those who might be thinking I'm off my rocker because I'm going to proceed in talking about demons as having actual existence that's okay. But the longer I live and walk with the Lord, the more I find it to simply be true that the devil exists, that demons are a way to talk about the evil we find in people and systems and how literal or figurative they are really isn't my main concern.

Just as God is good and creator of all, that which opposes God – the darkness to God's light or the jealous, greedy angel who fell from heaven and actively works against God's goodness because he wants God's power – that force, that person, that system of evil is real. It just is.

And when that demon heard God's own voice read God's own truth it couldn't stay undercover and on the down-low anymore. It was scared. It knew that it was in danger. The voice of God speaking the truth of God scares evil.

This is why James writes in 4:7-8, *"⁷ Therefore, submit to God. Resist the devil, and he will run away from you. ⁸ Come near to God, and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners. Purify your hearts, you double-minded."*

And lest we think that the devil doesn't come to church, who among us hasn't been distracted and tempted to focus on things other than the Lord? Who among us hasn't been critical and distracted by the heating and cooling? Who hasn't been distracted because the music wasn't our favorite? Who hasn't been distracted by the kid being busy in the pew behind us? Whose mind hasn't drifted away from the proclaiming of the Word when their stomach growls? Do I need to go on?

The greatest modern look at the place of the devil and his minions is in C.S. Lewis's "The Screwtape Letters." I don't know if you've heard of it, but it is a collection of satire that he wrote for a publication which was later gathered into a book. The premise is that the letters are written by a middle management demon names Screwtape to his nephew, a low-level demon on assignment to human male who is over time committed to God's side. The letters are written from the perspective of working to keep people from going whole-heartedly to the enemy camp (drawing near to God).

I want to share the letter on church distractions, but I recommend the whole book.

EXCERPT, The Screwtape Letters, Letter II

I share this because while it is important to recognize and respond to the voice of God as we seek guidance and to live faithfully, we also need to know that the voice of God is more than the voice that offers sound advice that we can take or leave. The voice of God is the only voice that comes with authority. When God speaks, things change.

This demon that shouted in the middle of church couldn't stand the voice of God. It wanted away, wanted out. And Jesus didn't just tell the person possessed to sit down and hush. Jesus addressed the evil for what it was and commanded it away. Jesus can do that. Jesus is God. And that authority is exactly what got him killed, exactly what threatened the human authorities who liked their power and the way they did things. The authority that evil had no choice but to recognize is the authority that we need so much not just to hear, but to trust.

Recognizing the voice of God and responding to the voice of God includes what we might call spiritual warfare. It includes understanding that there are movements of evil and destruction at work in the world. It includes understanding that there is more than meets the eye in many situations. These are the parts of the Bible that many folks find hard to grasp and apply because when we take seriously that God and the devil exist in a whole other dimension, in the spiritual realm to which we have limited access, then we feel like we have no control and that is uncomfortable.

But I find that the more I am aware of the devil and his schemes, the more secure I am because I am much more intentional about drawing near to God.

And the first century took this stuff for granted in large part. It wasn't just that they were uneducated and we know better, they just didn't ignore some realities that we brush aside because we can't explain them. I read a great article about how we ignore the spiritual reality of evil in which the author compared how we often view evil as a Scooby-Doo mystery. There's always a logical, human explanation behind every haunted, scary situation.

Some threats are human, but some are well beyond any individual. And I'm not talking boogey-men or ghosts or werewolves. I mean the stuff that the Apostle Paul writes about in Ephesians 6: 10-18, *"¹⁰ Finally, be strengthened by the Lord and his powerful strength. ¹¹ Put on God's armor so that you can make a stand against the tricks of the devil. ¹² We aren't fighting against human enemies but against rulers, authorities, forces of cosmic darkness, and spiritual powers of evil in the heavens. ¹³ Therefore, pick up the full armor of God so that you can stand your ground on the evil day and after you have*

done everything possible to still stand. ¹⁴ So stand with the belt of truth around your waist, justice as your breastplate, ¹⁵ and put shoes on your feet so that you are ready to spread the good news of peace. ¹⁶ Above all, carry the shield of faith so that you can extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is God's word.

¹⁸ Offer prayers and petitions in the Spirit all the time. Stay alert by hanging in there and praying for all believers."

I offer this word today because I know from experience that if a person really starts to focus on God and listen to God's voice, and then to even take the steps to live in obedience as the chosen response to what we hear...well, our enemy the devil does not take it lying down.

But just like the voice of God speaking the words of God made the demon in church scared and obedient to Jesus's rebuke, when we who have the Spirit of the Living God within us speak the words of God – the one word name above all names 'Jesus' or the promises of God that we can speak from the scriptures – when we do this, the devil must flee.

And it feels kind of silly when it's a new thing, but let me tell you that it is effective. If you feel scattered or pulled or pushed around when you are trying to listen to God, talk to God or live in God through Jesus, you just stop in the middle of what you're doing just like Jesus and speak truth over the lies. And if you need prayer support, then please just share your prayer need with me and I will speak the truth over you when I pray.

As we close we are going to sing a song that speaks truth all over us.

As we prepare to sing, let us pray...