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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
2/1/2009, The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany  
Mark 1:21-28

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>23</sup>And there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, <sup>24</sup>Saying, Let us alone; what have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth?(Mark 1:23-24, KJV)

This is a sermon about the demonic and the angelic. Let me start off with the angelic.

A curious and lovely thing is happening these days up at The Wartburg Community, where my wife, Carol, is Chaplain. The Wartburg is a Lutheran institution. It always has been Lutheran, going back to its founding as an orphanage for orphans of the Civil War to these days, when it cares for the elderly. From the days of the great William Passavant, the founder, to the days of my Carol, the chaplain, The Wartburg is a Lutheran place. Yet, this past week a group of fifty elderly Dominican nuns began the process of leaving their convent and retiring to The Wartburg.

Many retirement communities would have loved to receive these religious women, but after much study, the nuns chose The Wartburg. I like to think that among the factors leading the nuns there, was an air of holiness about the place. At least this much is certain: Carol understands and sympathizes with the community and devotional life of the nuns and means to support them in carrying on devotional practices they have lived with for most of their lives.

Carol told me about one tiny, elderly nun who confided her worry to the President of The Wartburg, "I won't have to live alone will I? I have never lived alone. I have always lived in with others. Please don't make me live alone." And he reassured her that she would not be alone, but would be living with her Dominican sisters.

This past Tuesday, Carol and other Wartburg staff members spent much of the day with the Dominicans, showing them around, listening to them, answering their questions, doing the best they could to comfort them in face of this tremendous change in their lives. And then, at the end of the day, when the sisters were about ready to board their bus and return to their convent for the time remaining to them there, they thanked the Wartburg staff and said to them, "Now, we have a blessing for you." And the fifty sisters stood up and sang a benediction upon Carol and the rest.

Carol said that tears came to her eyes to be blessed by these fifty elderly nuns. (In fact, it brings tears to my eyes to simply think of it.) Aye, and not only that. I bet that if there were any demons in that place, they just had to flee. Before the fifty voices singing their benediction, and before those fifty lives consecrated to Christ for so long, I bet any unclean spirits would be rendered very uncomfortable. Yes, if there were any unclean spirits lingering in that place, I bet they could hardly stand to be there anymore when confronted by the clean and strong spirit of Jesus as it shown through the united singing of those fifty elderly voices.

In this morning's Gospel story, we see the Original at work. Here we see the One the Dominican nuns and the whole Communion of Saints adore:

<sup>23</sup>And there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, <sup>24</sup>Saying, Let us alone; what have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? art thou come to destroy us? I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God.

It is old-fashioned, I know, to speak of the demonic. But, alas, we still have cause to worry about the demons. The “demonic” is an old-fashioned notion, but a notion confirmed by practical experience even in our modern world. For does it not seem to us that the human evil in this world is greater than the sum parts of it? Does it not seem that there is simply more evil than there are people to account for it? Does not the wickedness in this world simply seem spooky, as if it goes beyond *all* the sins of the human heart? And does it not seem that there are destructive forces within us and besetting us that we *would not have* if we could simply order them away? The mystery of iniquity: Does it not trouble even modern men, modern women?

But the good news is that the demons flee from Jesus. One day, they will flee right out of this world, forever!

But there was a cost to be paid. It was a cost connected with the authority with which Jesus commanded even the unclean spirits, and they obeyed.

This authority of Jesus is one of the strong themes of this morning’s Gospel Lesson. The people who beheld Jesus were struck by the authority of his teaching:

<sup>22</sup>And they were astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as one that had authority, and not as the scribes.(Mark 1:22, KJV)

Also, they were struck by his authority over the demons:

<sup>27</sup>And they were all amazed, insomuch that they questioned among themselves, saying, What thing is this? what new doctrine is this? for with authority commandeth he even the unclean spirits, and they do obey him.(Mark 1:28, KJV)

Likewise, you might recall from last Sunday’s reading the authority with which Jesus summoned his disciples. He had the power to enter the lives of grown men, with their own lives and traditions and momentums, and to say, “Follow me,” and they up and follow him.

The problem is that sometimes there is a cost to such authority, either immediately or farther on the road. Judas, for example, was initially swept along by the authority of Jesus, yet in the end, he rebelled against that authority. Indeed, his rebellion took the awful form of betraying his Master.

There always seems to be this risk connected with authority: the one exercising the authority might do a wonderful amount of good along the way, yet in the end, the one exercising authority faces risk.

Let me give you a recent example. I mean that wondrous story of the airliner that landed on our nearby Hudson River, with not a soul lost. That “miracle on 34th Street,” as Governor David Patterson referred to it, had much to do with the authority of the plane’s pilot, Chesley B. Sullenberger III<sup>1</sup>. He was not undone by the dangerous and the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/16/nyregion/16crash.html>

unexpected. He did not shy away from making his decisions and giving his commands. His calm authority helped save the day. In that chaotic and terrifying situation, people listened to his voice and obeyed him, and in listening and obeying, all were saved.

And it was not just *his* authority that mattered. Likewise, authoritative decisions were made by the captains of commuter ferries and tug boats, fire boats and police boats. They all made the crucial decisions, they hastened off to save souls, they put their boats in danger and their clean records at risk. And in the exercise of their authority, they weathered all storms, and God bless them strong for doing so.

But sometimes the one who acts with such calm authority goes down with the ship. I think of that when I read about Captain Sullenberger being the last one out — the way he walked up and down the aisle twice to make sure the plane was empty. A plane is not a boat. A plane takes in water and might suddenly sink. But there was the pilot, calmly exercising his authority to make certain no one was left behind.

And the thing about Jesus is, he went down with the ship. He came to contend with the demonic, with sin, even with death itself, and he calmly defeated them. But it cost him his life.

He lives. It is the best news this world will ever know. He lives, and his nature remains the same: he continues to contend with sin, death, and the devil, and he would use *us* for the battle.

You belong to Him, as surely as you are Baptized, and so you share in his power to dispel the demonic in this world. The example of the fifty singing nuns is but a humble example of what I mean. It was not just the singing that might have caused the demons to tremble, it was also *who* was doing the singing. The nuns had surrendered their lives to Christ. They had not counted the cost, but had freely yielded themselves to Jesus to be the kind of women they are. They had spent their years consecrated to Christ — a kind of echo of Christ's own consecration — and thereby they became the kind of women who can move many of us and cause the unclean spirits to flee.

Because you are Christ's woman, Christ's man, you are on the path to a kind of goodness that cannot be explained in ordinary categories. I mean, you are on the path toward a holiness of life that the unclean spirits will dislike. In the end, they would rather invade a herd of pigs and throw themselves off a cliff than to have many more dealings with you.

Whether you are big or little, rich or poor, strong or weak, you have power to be on the side of the good in this world. You can oppose those destructive forces swirling around in this world — both the forces that would hurt your neighbor and the forces that would hurt you.

Learn to see this world through the eyes of Christ's compassion, and you are on your way. You will cause the demons to tremble and you will bring glory to Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.