

March 19, 2025 – 1 Peter 5:6-11 & Luke 9:37-43a, 11:15-23

It is a remarkable thing to see a person thrown to the ground. Up until recently, I had only seen such an act on television or in a movie theater. Where a stunt man was thrown to the ground by an actor. Or a professional wrestler was thrown to the mat by... well... an actor, once again. But these weren't real. They were fake. Play-fighting by skilled performers.

But then my daughter began taking Brazilian jiu jitsu. And I came to watch her practices. And I saw these kids and adults throw each other to the ground. And this wasn't acting. This wasn't performing. This wasn't play fighting. This was training. Learning how to throw an attacker off of you so that you could gain the upper hand. Learning how to fall so that you would not be injured and could quickly retake control of the situation.

It was remarkable. Something I had never seen in person, really. It was violent. Occasionally a bit painful. But a necessary part of her training. And as I was reading the first half of our Gospel lesson today, I started thinking about those scenes in Emi's Brazilian jiu jitsu class.

This lesson begins as Jesus is coming down from a mountain. He's coming down, actually, from the mountain of the transfiguration. Peter, James, and John are with him, but the other nine disciples were left behind at the base of the mountain. Where they have encountered a man who is looking for Jesus.

You see his only son is possessed by an unclean spirit. A demon. And the description of what the demon does to the boy sounds like a Brazilian jiu jitsu fight. It seizes him, and he suddenly cries out. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth. It shatters him and will hardly leave him. It throws him to the ground, like a jiu jitsu fighter taking down his competitor.

There is a battle here – a war – between this boy and the demon. And the demon always wins. The unclean spirit lays its filthy hands on the boy and tosses him around like a rag doll. Until he is bruised and beaten and utterly shattered, in body and mind, mostly likely.

Why does it do this? We don't know. I hesitate to try and understand the mind of something so evil. But from the looks of it, the demon does this to the boy because... it can. Because evil spirits like this one delight in torturing helpless children. They delight in seeing anguished fathers look on helplessly. They delight in destroying God's creation. Especially his littlest children.

And so the father has sought out Jesus. But Jesus isn't there. He's up on the mountain, talking to Moses and Elijah, and revealing his glory to his closest friends. So the other disciples do their best. They've seen Jesus cast out demons. They know what he says and what he does. They try to help. But they don't get anywhere with this demon.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus tells them this is because this kind of demon can only come out by prayer. And in all of the accounts, Jesus points to their lack of faith as a serious problem. Why? Because this demon is strong. It is stronger than any of them. Just as it physically grabs hold of this boy and throws him to the ground again and again, so it will spiritually throw off any attack they try to make at it. They are simply not strong enough.

They need help. They need faith in the one who conquers demons. They need to pray to the only one who can help them. They need to set aside their pride and cling to Jesus.

Because, with Jesus, all it takes is a simple rebuke and the demon is gone. A single command, and the boy is fully healed and given back to his father. The demon was too strong for the boy AND his father AND the disciples put together. But for Jesus, getting rid of the unclean spirit is child's play. And the crowds who see it are astonished at the majesty of God.

It's so easy that Jesus doesn't even describe it as the hand of God at work. No, casting out demons is done by the finger of God, he says in the section from chapter 11. Jesus merely flicks his finger and the unclean spirit is gone. Just as before the Exodus, God brought deadly plagues upon the Egyptians and Pharaoh's magicians likewise recognized them to be the finger of God at work to free his people from bondage.

The finger of God easily freed the Israelites from slavery to Pharaoh. The finger of God easily freed this young boy from slavery to a demon. The finger of God easily frees us from sin, death, and the devil.

That's, at least, one interpretation of what Jesus says. The other way that we can look at his reference to the finger of God is to connect it to another time in the Bible when the finger of God is discussed, during the giving of the Ten Commandments.

There, it was the finger of God that wrote God's Law on the tablets of stone that Moses carried down from Mt Sinai. And so the finger of God is the way in which God delivers his Word to his people. The finger of God is the Word of God. The finger of God is the Word made flesh, delivering that same message of Law and judgement to the devil and his minions. Delivering that same message of Gospel and freedom to his people in distress.

Whatever the case, when some see how easily Jesus casts out demons, surprisingly, it doesn't inspire joy or faith in them. Rather, they see the power that Jesus wields and wonder... is he actually on our side? After all, couldn't he just be a more powerful demon commanding lesser demons. Might he just be Beelzebub, the prince of demons, giving orders to his underlings?

Jesus, of course, points out the absurdity of that logic. Satan isn't going to cast out his own forces. He's not going to fight against his own demons. Jesus isn't just commanding the forces of Satan. He's destroying them, with a flick of his finger.

Humanity was held captive by a strong man. A man strong enough to seize, convulse, shatter, and throw down any human being who stood against him. And this strong man called the devil had made the earth his home since almost the beginning of creation. All the way back at the garden of Eden. And he had fiercely guarded it like a palace, so that no one could drive him out.

But Jesus is the stronger man. Who attacked and overcame him. Who stripped the devil of his armor and plundered his spoils. For we are the spoils Jesus has plundered. He has crushed the serpent's head, even though it meant enduring the pain of being struck by the devil on the cross.

And now? Now the devil is reduced to a roaring lion, roaming the land. The strong man in his palace has been reduced to a beast wandering the wilderness. A dangerous predator still, no doubt. An adversary to watch and be wary of. But he is the so-called ruler of this world no longer.

But why is he even still here? Why leave the devil to even be lion, prowling around, seeking someone to devour? Well, I think Peter answers at least part of that question pretty well.

The devil remains because we need to remain humble. Like those disciples who thought they could cast out demons without prayer or faith, we are proud, arrogant people. A faithless and twisted generation. And we need to be reminded of just how weak and helpless we are. We need to be shown just how frequently we are not watchful and not sober-minded. How quickly we doubt and fall away in times of suffering.

Most of all, we need to humble ourselves and we need to be humbled so that we can then see the mighty hand of God. Not just in how he works to destroy the devil. But in how he works to exalt us at the proper time. How he works to lift all the anxieties that we cast upon him. How he truly cares for us.

On our own, we would pridefully ignore all of God's love and care for us. All his acts of mercy and grace toward us. All his mighty acts of power to save us.

But it is after we suffer a little while, whether through the consequences of our own sin or just because of the fallen world around us, that we get the amazing gift of the God of all grace calling us to eternal glory in Christ Jesus. The devil seizes, convulses, shatters, and throws us to the ground. But it's in that moment that God restores, confirms, strengthens, and establishes us.

It is in that moment that we know without a doubt that this is no longer the devil's dominion. It is no longer his home. This world is the dominion of Jesus Christ forever and ever. Because his mighty hand has bound the strong man. He has crushed the serpent's head. The finger of God has cast out Beelzebub and his demons. And the kingdom of God has come to you. Amen.