

"The Power of Christ"
Sermon Series *The King and His Kingdom* #6
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First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC
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(Mt. 8:23-9:8)

Introduction.

Shortly after Faye Vincent resigned as the Commissioner of Major League Baseball back in 1992 he was interviewed by *Newsweek* magazine, and they asked him what it was like having all that power as the commissioner of baseball. His response was, "I like the line that the famous lobbyist Edward Bennett Williams said about power as he was dying. Someone asked him about all the power and influence he had in Washington, DC. He said, 'Power? I'm about to meet *real* power!'"¹

People talk a lot about power these days – The power of the mind, the power of computers, the power of a hurricane and wild fires, the power of the presidency, or the power of corporate America. But all of this power pales in comparison to the power of Jesus. And Edward Bennett Williams was right; he was about to meet *real* power in Almighty God!

This morning as we continue our series of sermons on *The King and His Kingdom* in the gospel of Matthew, we look at a passage of Scripture that talks about the power of Christ in three different dimensions. They are the power of Christ over nature, over evil, and over sin. Let's take a look at each of these briefly.

I. The Power of Christ over Nature.

"Then [Jesus] got into the boat and His disciples followed Him. Without warning, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat" (8:23,24). There is nothing like a dangerous storm rolling in when you're out of doors to cause you to become afraid. I can remember a time when my late wife Lorie and I were hiking the Franconia Ridge in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. We underestimated the climb, and as nighttime was falling a violent storm rushed over the range. We were forced to camp near the top of Mt. Lincoln at an elevation of 5,000 feet, and I can assure you, my prayer-life increased that night!

The calming of the storm on the Sea of Galilee is a classic example of the power of Christ over Nature. It makes clear that Jesus is Lord over all creation as well as Lord of the Church. He who set the planets in motion and placed the stars

in the heavens, the One who created the very laws of Nature which govern the universe, had authority over those laws and He could say a word and all creation would respond to His command.

Jesus directed His disciples to go over to the other side of the lake, the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, and together they got in a boat to travel there. Tired and exhausted from the demanding tasks of the day, Jesus was in the stern of the boat, and He fell asleep on a pillow, a cushion. Remember, Jesus was human; He got tired just like you and I do. Suddenly, a violent storm erupted, and waves began to crash against the boat, splashing over the sides.

The geographic location of the Sea of Galilee makes it particularly susceptible to sudden and violent storms like this one because it is situated in a basin surrounded by mountains. NT scholar G.A. Smith has written the following about the susceptibility of the Sea of Galilee to storms: "*The atmosphere for the most part, hangs still and heavy, but the cold currents, as they pass from the west, are sucked down in vortices of air, or by the narrow gorges that break upon the lake. Then arise those sudden storms for which the region is notorious.*"²

(SLIDE) While the storm began to swamp the boat, Jesus was asleep in the stern. The disciples became so alarmed at the situation that they woke Him up and cried out, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!" At this Jesus rebuked the wind, and He spoke to the waves. The result was that the storm died down immediately, and it was completely calm. The sovereign Lord of the universe spoke, and His creation immediately responded. But Jesus also rebuked the disciples for their lack of faith, and He challenged them to develop more of it. The result is that the disciples were amazed, and they asked each other, "What kind of man is this? Even the wind and the waves obey Him?!"

This story demonstrates that with the power of Christ, *there is no need to be afraid*. Whenever storms come our way and we feel like we're going to sink, it's encouraging to know that whatever happens, Jesus is with us, and He will see us through. There is no need to be afraid when Christ is with you in the boat when you're in the middle of a storm.

(SLIDE) William Cowper, who lived in England in the 1700-1800s, composed many hymns that are still sung today. During one dark period of his life, he battled heavy and persistent clouds of depression and they choked out all light and hope in his life. He tried to end it all one morning by swallowing poison, but his attempt at suicide failed. Then he took a buggy to the Thames River, intending to throw himself off the bridge, but he was, as he later said, "strangely restrained."

The next morning he fell on a sharp knife, and broke the blade! Failing in this method, he tried to hang himself, but was found by someone and taken down unconscious, but still alive. Sometime later, he started reading the Bible and he began to study the book of Romans in particular. By reading the Bible Cowper

met the God of storms, and he found peace in the midst of his difficult life. He wrote the following words to summarize Christ's dealings with him:

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.
Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never-failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs,
And works His sovereign will.³

What storm in your life are you dealing with this morning? Where is turbulent water or a howling wind threatening you? In what ways does it feel like Jesus has fallen asleep in your boat, and you wonder why He isn't doing anything? Call out to Jesus and ask Him to save you, and learn to trust Him by faith, even in the middle of your storm. It doesn't mean that God will always take the storm away; sometimes it means that He will reassure us that He is with us in the storm. As someone has said, "Sometimes God calms the storm, and sometimes He simply calms His child."

II. The Power of Christ over Evil.

"When He arrived at the other side in the region of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men coming from the tombs met Him. They were so violent that no one could pass that way. 'What do you want with us, Son of God?' they shouted. 'Have you come to torture us before the appointed time?'" (8:28,29). Jesus had already demonstrated His power over the forces of Nature by stilling the storm. Now He demonstrates His power over the forces of evil by casting out demons from two men who were possessed. The two stories go together. You could title them "The Wild Ones." Jesus stills the storms of the sea and the soul, of nature and of mind.

On the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, the population was largely Gentile, and it was called the region of the Gadarenes. There were two men there who were demon-possessed, and they lived among the tombs. These were natural caves cut out of the limestone rock where people made a practice of burying their dead. Efforts had been made to control these crazy men, but without success. No one was strong enough to subdue them.

The demons who possessed the men called out to Jesus and said, *"What do you want with us, Son of God? Have you come to torture us before the appointed time?" (8:29).* They addressed Jesus as "the Son God," because they realized who He was, and they pled with Him not to destroy them. Then they asked Jesus to allow them to go into a herd of pigs on the hillside nearby. As you know, pigs

were considered in Judaism as unclean animals, and Jewish people weren't allowed to eat pork as a part of their dietary laws. Jesus gave the demons permission to do so, and we're told that the herd of pigs rushed down a steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

This incident raises some interesting and confusing questions I wish we had more time to explore. For example, what about the whole matter of evil and demon possession? That's a sermon to itself! And why did Jesus allow the demons to go into the herd of pigs and destroy them? What justification could He have had? Why did the Lord allow the destruction of property like that?

The fact of the matter is I really don't really know that answer to these last two questions. Commentators offer a variety of answers, but none that I have read so far satisfy my curiosity completely. However, what should be seen above everything else here in this incident is that the fate of the pigs demonstrates the ultimate intention the demons had with respect to these two men they possessed. It is the purpose of evil to destroy the creation of God, and prevented in their destruction of these men, they fulfilled their purpose in the pigs.

What I think is most important to keep in mind in this passage is that it is a fresh reminder that you and I are engaged in a spiritual battle, and we need to be on our guard. The Bible says that Satan is a roaring lion, seeking to devour whom he might. In his writings C.S. Lewis reminded us that there are two mistakes Christians can make with respect to the demonic. One is to think that Satan and demons don't exist, and the other is to look for one under every rock!⁴ The caricature of Satan as a little man in a red suit with horns and a pitchfork has contributed to our misunderstanding in these matters. Nothing could be further from the truth! The demonic is real, it is clever, it is devious, it is insightful, it is at times attractive, and it's powerful. We need to be prepared to raise our shields of faith against it and to call on the power of Christ to overcome it whenever it comes your way!

There is renewed interest by many Christians today in spiritual warfare. Richard Foster was asked about this and he said: *"The good thing about the renewed interest in spiritual warfare is at least that it takes the spiritual world seriously. Yet there is little reflection and little theology accompanying this fascination. We need to provide balance. While we should not go hunting for a demon behind every bush, we must (also) recognize that great spiritual battles are going on. (And) We want to be on the team that comes out in the end and take up, as Paul said in Ephesians 6, the armor of God...."*⁵

What battle are you engaged in today of a spiritual nature? Does it involve your family, or someone at work or school? Are you engaged in combatting some of the social evils and injustice in our world today like racism? These are demonic bonds in the world that need to be broken. If you try to do this by yourself, you

will be defeated. You're not strong enough. You need God's help. Jesus has power over evil, and in Him we can overcome. When you're engaged in spiritual warfare, remember Martin Luther's advice: *"The best way to drive out the devil, if he will not yield not yield to texts of Scripture, is to jeer and flout him, for he cannot bear scorn!"*⁶

III. The Power of Christ over Sin.

When Jesus and His disciples crossed the lake again, they returned to Capernaum, and the text tells us that some people brought a paralytic man to Him, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the man, *"Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven"* (9:2). Jesus' response to their faith was unexpected and even startling because it seemed inappropriate and even irrelevant to the immediate situation. Here these men had brought their friend to Jesus in order to be healed by Him, and He's talking about the forgiveness of sins?!

However, our Lord's words are understandable when we see this story against the background of the OT where sin and disease, forgiveness and healing were frequently interrelated. For example, Psalm 103 says, *"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget none of his benefits; who pardons all you iniquities; who heals all you diseases."* Or take the situation of Job where his friends argued that if a person was suffering, he or she must have sinned.

We should understand that healing is indeed a gracious movement of the Spirit of God into the area of illness and disease which are expressions of death at work in the world. But we should also realize that we shouldn't think in terms of a corresponding sin for each instance of sickness. There's no suggestion in our passage that the paralytic's physical suffering was related to a specific sin. Sometimes bad things just happen. Rather, our Lord's pronouncement of pardon should be understood as the recognition that a person can be genuinely whole **only** when sin has been healed through God's forgiveness, no matter how healthy a person may be physically. In almost every instance of healing in the NT, the person not only experienced a physical healing but also a spiritual one too.

When the scribes heard Jesus say to the man that his sins were forgiven, they were offended by Christ's declaration. Only God could forgive sins, and for any person to claim to do so was blasphemy. Jesus realized what they were thinking, so He challenged them with a counter-question. "Which is easier," He asked, "to say to a person, 'your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and Walk'?"

The implication is that neither act is possible for a mere human being to perform. Certainly not the forgiveness of sins, which is God's prerogative. But since miraculous healing can also only be accomplished by the power of God, then it follows that the one who can do the healing is also authorized to do the forgiving. Any charlatan can say, "Your sins are forgiven," but it would take a

person who had the power of God in them to perform a miracle of healing. By healing the paralytic, which was open to verification, Jesus demonstrated that He had the authority from God to forgive the sins of people as well.

There were two congregations of differing denominations which were located only a few blocks from each other in a small town. They thought that it might be better if they would merge and become one church, larger and more effective, rather than two struggling churches. It seemed like a good idea to everyone..... until. They couldn't agree on how they would recite the Lord's Prayer. One group wanted "forgive us our trespasses" while the other demanded "forgive us our debts." So the newspaper reported that one church went back to its trespasses, while the other returned to its debts!⁷

That's the way it is for many of us, isn't it? We have a hard time really believing that God truly loves and forgives us for what we've done in the past, and we return to our mindset of sin, to our own debts and trespasses. "Oh, but you don't know what I've done. You don't know what an awful person I am," we think to ourselves. "How can a holy God forgive someone like me? The things I have done; the things I have thought and said and the things I've seen?" Many of us feel the burden of our sin, and we see all too clearly just how far we fall short of God's desires.

The amazing truth of the gospel is that God does love people just like you and me, and He desires to forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. You cannot fall farther than God is able to reach you, and His love for you is unconditional, unending, and unfailing. But we must have the faith to believe God and take Him at His word when He says, *"Though your sin be as scarlet, yet it shall be white as snow. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our sin from us. If we confess our sin, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* Christ has power over sin. Do you believe it?

Conclusion.

There are many times when I feel powerless in life. What about you? We're only a phone call away from being taken to our knees, aren't we? The doctor calls and says, "The path report has come back, and it's not good. You've got cancer." Your boss calls you into her office and says, "I'm sorry, but the company is downsizing. You no longer have a job here. We have to lay you off." Or your parents tell you they don't love each other anymore and they're getting a divorce. In a moment's time, we realize just how powerless we really are.

Several years ago, I traveled to India for a mission trip. On that trip we visited the Deserted City near Agra. It's a magnificent city of red limestone that was constructed in the 16th century by a Muslim emperor named Akbar. It took 10,000

men over 12 years to build. But the sad reality is that after living there for only 5 years, Akbar and his whole court abandoned the city. Why? The water supply dried up. Here we stood marveling at this remarkable mammoth example of beautiful architecture, and we realized that it was abandoned because they exhausted their resources.

There are times when I feel like that Muslim ruler. I exhaust my human resources to deal with what life throws at me, and I feel so powerless. However, I've discovered that with God's Spirit I have access to a power source which can change my life and help me cope even in the midst of my problems.

What you and I cannot do in our own strength, God can do through us. With the apostle Paul we can say that God's strength is perfected in our weakness, for when I am weak then I am strong in power of the Lord (2 Cor. 12). But the power of God is conditional. It's only as we're connected to the source of power in God's Holy Spirit will we be able to deal with the challenges that come our way and bring the power of God to bear in our lives and in the world.

Where do you feel powerless this morning? What is there you need to do, but you just don't have the strength to do it? In what ways is God calling you to tap into His power source in the midst of your own weakness? Jesus promised to give us power. He is the King, and He wants to give us the power of His kingdom.

¹*Newsweek*, July 20, 1992. Adapted.

²G.A. Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, 1909.

³Charles Swindoll, *Growing Strong in the Seasons of Life*, p.133.

⁴C.S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*.

⁵Quoted in *Christianity Today*, October 5, 1992, p.73.

⁶Quoted in C.S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, p.5.

⁷Source unknown.