

Binding the Strong Man (6June21)  
Gen3:8-15; Mark3:20-35; 2Cor4:13-5:1

What to do about all of this?

Our first reading from Genesis is fraught with layers of misinterpretive garbage, entrenching patriarchy for generations, either warping the fabric of society by the story or warping the story with the sinful preconditions of society.

It's a hard Bible reading even without extra blame denigrating the woman, and without biological hereditary details of original sin, without making the serpent into something he's not (like into Satan, which is likely the association the lectionary leaps to today). Genesis shows a breakdown in all kinds of relationships—with other humans, with creatures like the serpent and the misused tree, with our own bodies in shame, and in hiding from God, all resulting in long-lasting separation.

The Gospel reading seems doubly lodged in those fractures. Only three chapters in, the conflict is already fierce. Jesus' friends and family think he's gone nuts and want to seize him and force him to shut up. He reacts by further shredding his culture's ultimate fabric that tied the family's standing all together; he disregards them and the familial values.

At the same time, authorities from Jerusalem bring accusations. These guys came from the capital city, the center of culture, using all their authority against Jesus. One reasonable analogue would be Joseph McCarthy labeling opponents as Communists. In this case, they are trying to sideline Jesus by saying he opposes their connection to God and spiritual work. They accuse him of operating through an unclean spirit, dressing up their discredit with the colorful term Beelzebul, perhaps meaning the Lord of Dung.

Just as Jesus refuses to be shut up by his family, he responds rather directly to the accusation. He essentially flips the tables, saying he is doing God's work and bears the Holy Spirit, so it is they who are the satanic opposition.

If we took it as re-presenting Genesis, we could see Jesus in God's place, cursing Satan. But Jesus

isn't trying to punish and cast them out, as we typically claim happens in Genesis. A frontal assault would obviously never work against those powers, and 12 chapters later his bold stance inevitably leads to his execution.

But actually Jesus is working on redemption, striving to reclaim what belongs to God and set things back in order. His description of his subversive strategy goes like this: "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." Jesus is coming like a thief in the night to plunder the strong man's house—those authorities, the culture, and much more.

To be clear, this isn't going to be about Jesus defeating his enemies, at least not how we'd typically conceive of that. It's not about a movement and expanding the mob that is so crowded into his house they can't even eat. So it's also not about raising church attendance to get more on his side. That's not how he'll do it. It's not trying to put in place a theocracy, to make a Christian nation, as if values could legislatively force people to be closer to God, nor about you personally trying to be better. That is not how Jesus will find redemption and bring things back into God's order. Those actually try to coddle the strong man and tidy up his house, rather than tying him up to plunder it.

For Jesus plundering Satan, rather than restricting this to a superhero battling the ultimate villain, it helps to know that the word satan isn't a name or title; it means accuser. And for what Jesus is doing, that has to be a much broader scope. Those from Jerusalem who are literally accusing him are satan, and as they misuse their authority they are satan. The illnesses he's been confronting as they take away life are satan. Jesus' family and friends trying to stifle and silence him are satan. Our sin and fractured relationships in the blaming and seeking to better our own position are satan. Our thinking we can—and need to—hide from God is satan.

Seeing it that broadly shows just what Jesus is up against and why taking it head-on would be

bound to fail. He needs to be subversive, stealing in with a sneak attack to plunder the strong man's household.

One way we describe how he does this is through forgiveness. Jesus himself says that every blasphemy will be forgiven. Blasphemy is actually a Greek word with a root meaning "hurtful." The hurtful things aren't returned in a retributive cycle of violence, trying to attack what hurts you, but are forgiven.

Unfortunately the Genesis story isn't trying to portray that part of things, but it's interesting to imagine if the woman would say to the man, "I forgive you for blaming me" and if the man would say "I understand you gave me the fruit to try helping me and offering wisdom," to imagine if we said to our bodies, "I'm not ashamed of you, will you forgive me," even to imagine how we would regard snakes and serpents, perhaps not as evil or scary, if there had been forgiveness.

Of course, some of our hurts we feel we need to cling to. We want justice, by which we mean evening the score. Forgiveness is less appealing. Even if God in Jesus declares forgiveness and redemption from all our hurts and sins, it doesn't feel very satisfying.

Which brings us more directly to how Jesus effects this. Since the strong man's household isn't interested in the forgiveness he's selling, he can't show up as a door-to-door salesman pitching cheap grace. We already said he can't do it forcibly. Instead, he sneaks in to plunder, to take away the hurt and blame and leave grace in its place.

In the garden, the man and woman put on clothing and hid from God. In Jesus, God puts on clothing and hides from us. He sneaks in. God steals into our very bodies and lives. When the authorities execute him, just when death thinks it has driven him out to continue its reign and control of the household, Jesus is raised and therefore binds death, confining its rule over us, limiting the hurt on our lives, reclaiming us for God's intended goodness.

2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians says that as God raised Jesus from the dead, we too will be raised. This isn't a heavenly afterlife, and not just for eventual

resurrection, but is already now stealing you out of the household of deadly accusations and plundering you back into God's possession with reconciliation. So even as our bodies are gradually dying, Paul declares you are being made stronger each day. The strong man isn't retaining his control over you. He's not so strong.

The hiding Jesus does this not in what is seen of your body and your struggles with death and with life. It's not in evaluating your hurts, what you've done, what you've failed to do, what's been done to you, not in tallying suffering. In Paul's language, we keep our minds on Christ hiding within us while remaining unseen. In that, you may know Jesus is struggling to bring you again into God's presence, stealing you away from the strong man, and back into the household and family of God. That is for your benefit, and as it takes you away from hurt, it is for the benefit of your neighbor and all creation.