

Sermon Text for January 12, 2020

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

II Kings 5:8-14, Acts 19:11-20
“On magic, spirits and Jesus”

This was a hard week for me to prepare for this Sunday’s message. As you know I can get easily caught up with what is happening in the world that it can become somewhat consuming, which is not healthy when you are responsible for reading Scripture and interpreting it in a way that can be used by 250 people on Sunday, each of us coming from a different reality and a different point of view and a different perspective on a number of different fronts.

My favorite theologian of all time is Karl Barth and in 1933 when Hitler was rising to power he said something very interesting which I have tried to use in my time as a pastor. He said that regardless of what is happening in the world around you our task as preachers is to ensure that preaching goes on as if nothing happened. When Emil Brunner criticized him later on for being passive in the face of a world threat he responded by saying: If preachers had preached as if nothing had happened then the forces of evil would have found themselves surrounded on all sides by people and churches who would not have permitted them to take a single step forward.

There is plenty happening around us to lift up our voices to God. On Wednesday we had our ministerium meeting and we heard that Tobias Lehman is not doing well and that his options are becoming much more limited. Are we spending the energy and the time that we need to be in order to ask for God’s intervention in his life. We are not isolationists. We care what is happening around us and we do not compromise the Word of God but believe that the Word of God has something to say about hope and grace and peace and words that do not lead to that are the work of the devil.

So today I am preaching as if nothing has happened this week. We find ourselves on a Sunday known as the Baptism of the Lord when we celebrate the time that Jesus is initiated for the work of redemption for the rest of his life. We celebrate that when he came out of the water when he was baptized by John the Holy Spirit descended and His father proclaimed this is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. We celebrate that he was given power and presence in a way that would change the world forever, if we would only allow him to do so.

Our journey with Paul today takes us where he is also exhibiting great power. The word in the first verse that we read today when speaking about his miracles calls them *dunamis* which comes from the word for dynamite so Paul is exhibiting explosive power, the kind of power that

can rock your world. And in this Scripture we address areas where the world thinks there is power such as magic and spirits. And we come back and realize that there is no power aside from the presence of our Savior Jesus. Let's read.

READ SCRIPTURE

Today we start in the Jordan River. **SHOW PICTURES OF THE JORDAN** It is here where Jesus was baptized by John as a sign of his power and to demonstrate to the world the support that he had from the Father. It is from here where he was equipped with all that he needed to go into the world and begin his ministry. This Sunday marks the beginning of the ministry of Jesus and so we celebrate it as we recognize that what Jesus was equipped with is the very same thing that we are equipped with, the power of the presence of Almighty God, so whatever Jesus did, so we can do also. Before we get to Paul and see what he was able to do, which was very similar to what Jesus did with his miracles, we stay in the Jordan for a story of another miracle.

Naaman, the king of Israel, is stuck with leprosy and no one is able to heal him because they all tried to find ways aside from the Lord to heal him, the prophets of the day look elsewhere. But not Elijah, Elijah was, as this Scripture states, a man of God and one of the only remaining prophets whose agenda was just to do the work of God and was not compromised by the culture around him which saw magic and other gods as the route to how we ought to live. There weren't any other people of God like Elijah around.

So the king asks to be healed, is given a really simple task which he believed was below him to do in order to be healed of his leprosy and storms off in a rage that he wasn't treated with more respect. But those close to him talk him off the cliff and remind him that if God wills a miracle to happen even in the most simplistic mundane manner possible, it can happen. And so he goes and dips himself into the Jordan seven times and he is healed. Miracles happen when God is involved. When God is taken out of the picture then we are only left with magic and superstition.

The formal definition of magic, if anyone wants to know is an attempt by human beings to compel a divinity, by the use of physical means, to do what they wish the divinity to do. So it is our attempt to try to control god, or a god, by physical means, in order for us to get a result that we want out of God. Naaman is healed by water, even if it was not the physical way in which he wanted to be healed. He wanted something a bit more elegant. Jesus healed a blind man by putting mud on his eyes. Jesus healed a woman with an issue of blood merely by her touching the hem of his robe. Peter's shadow in Acts was able to heal people who walked in it. All these things may sound like magic to us. But the distinction between magic and miracles is

that miracles take place at the beckoning and the command of God, while magic takes place through our words and our desires and our wishes that are not at all aligned with God.

When we get to Acts we find this image of magic and spirits and miracles all intermingled together. We find Paul in Ephesus which was considered in the first century the city of magic. In fact today we have ancient magic scrolls that are called the Ephesus scrolls simply because it was in Ephesus where you went if you were involved in any way with magic and trying to get the people to evolve into being convinced that what you had and what you were able to do would be able to change the reality which you face. Ephesus was the center and the capital of all things magical.

Paul is described in vs. 11 as someone through whom God was able to perform extraordinary or dunamys or powerful miracles. Paul as a result became very, very popular, to the point where others who were involved in the trade of magic thought that it would be a good idea to either use the name of Paul, or to use the name of the person that Paul used, which was Jesus, in order to use in their trade. We have an ancient magical scroll called the Paris Magical Papyrus which states: "I adjure thee by Jesus the God of the Hebrews." As part of one of the incantations that it encourages magicians to use.

And this actually worked for some people. There was a whole business of those who cast out demons and even healed the sick using formulas and magical incantations because there was the understanding that there was a very close connection with those who were sick and those who were possessed with evil spirits and the only way to drive out the evil spirits was with magic. We find a story of one of these occurrences where we have 7 sons of a high priest who were engaged in the business of driving out demons and trying to use magic for their profit.

When they tried to use the name of Jesus on the spirit said we know Jesus and we know Paul but we don't know you and this single man was able to overcome 7 men and force them out of the house injured and somehow they lost their clothes on the way out as well. Very strange, very unorthodox. But they attempted to use the name of Jesus in a way that would profit them, in a way that was completely devoid of who Jesus really was. Anything that we do which is detached from God and yet attempts to capture the power of God only leads to trouble.

When we lived in Naples where my first two daughters were born they had the festival of San Gennaro where the blood of an ancient saint was brought out into the public square and if it liquefied then it would translate into good years. Those years that it did not liquefy then it was thought it would be bad years. This is not of God. If you look at your horoscope and take any stock in it, just know that it is not of God and maybe you think it is harmless but I bet you make

more decisions based on that, if you read it, then on what the Scripture that you read for that day, if you read Scripture daily, says for you to do.

Brothers and sisters, it matters what we believe. What we believe has an impact on our daily lives. If we believe that Jesus is the only way, the only truth, the only life then that is going to have an impact on how we live our lives. If we believe that Jesus is one of many ways, or one of many options and the other options we use to buttress our in what we believe from culture, then it will not end up in a good way.

At the end of this Scripture we see that all the magicians of Ephesus were turned to Christ and burned their books as a symbol of their renewed covenant with the Lord. Now, I know in this country we don't have a good record with book burnings. When I was a pastor in Florida a local church thought it was a good idea to burn Khorans, and that didn't turn out so good. The difference here is that the magicians themselves, those who were not relying upon Christ, thought it was an important symbol for them in order to demonstrate to themselves that they no longer wanted a part in this.

What is it that symbolically you need to burn in your life that you are using as crutch to live or where you think you can find answers when all along all the power and everything that you need is seen in Christ? Magic is often a symbol for people who are looking for shortcuts to power. That always lures humans to actions that are destructive, these shortcuts to power. Jesus cannot be used to support human endeavors as if he were talisman that we only have to wear around our necks and all that we do will be supported by him.

Jesus will have no authority on our lips if he has no impact on our hearts. Jesus does not represent or support anything which is solely for the benefit of humans and is not of benefit for his kingdom. We live in a time where as Christians we have to be very very careful. In 1979 my brother was a senior in high school and the valedictorian was stripped of the right to speak at his graduation simply because she was an Iranian American. Look it up, 1979 Atlantic City High School. After 9-11 in the town where I served in Palatka outside of a bar there was hanging from a noose an arab effigy. My clerk and I went in the bar and asked him to take it down and he asked us not so nicely to leave because people in his bar didn't like seeing a pastor there. I showed up every day until they took it down.

As Christians we have to be careful because we are living in a time where what Christ requires of us might be masked by the magic of culture and its demands. Don't fall to that temptation. Our power comes from our conversion into and a power derived from a relationship with a risen Christ and that alone. May God bless us in these days. Amen.