

Sermon: Binding the Strong Man

New North Church

Rev. Steven M. Aucella

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Based on **Psalm 130; Mark 3:20-35**

At 5:00 p.m. on June 16, 1858, more than 1,000 delegates chose Abraham Lincoln as their candidate for the U.S. Senate, to run against Democrat Stephen Douglas. At 8:00 p.m., Lincoln spoke to his Republican colleagues in the Hall of Representatives, delivering what is now known as the ‘House Divided’ speech.¹

His friends regarded the speech as too radical for the occasion. His law partner, William Herndon, thought Lincoln was morally courageous but politically incorrect, and he complained to his friend about it. Lincoln said to Herndon, ‘I am not the author of it. God is. Go and whine and complain to Him for its revelation, and utterance.’

Another friend, Leonard Swett, said the speech defeated Lincoln in the Senate campaign. In 1866 he wrote to Herndon saying, ‘Nothing could have been more unfortunate or inappropriate; it was saying first the wrong thing, yet he saw it was an abstract truth, but standing by the speech would ultimately find him in the right place.’

Ol’ Abe knew what he was doing. Before he even gave the speech, he told Herndon, ‘The proposition is indisputably true ... and I will deliver it as written.’

When Lincoln said, ‘A house divided against itself cannot stand,’ he was speaking about how, if slavery as an institution were to continue, the ‘government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free.’ He could see that the persistence of slavery in the United States would not cause ‘the house to fall,’ but he said he did ‘expect it will *cease to be divided*. It will become all one thing or all the other.’

As a political speech, it may have killed Lincoln’s Senate run but it eventually won him the presidency and the end of slavery after a tremendous struggle on the battlefields of America.

In the first three chapters of Mark’s Gospel, controversy abounds. We can pick over the details, but in its essence, Jesus’ relationships are being tested and are seemingly breaking down.

Lincoln could not have chosen a more volatile verse when he borrowed the ‘house divided’ idea and applied it to a specific crisis, but Jesus said it first.

The general situation may have influenced his thinking.

The scribes from Jerusalem said, '[Jesus] has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.' Jesus disagreed, saying that it was impossible for Satan to cast out Satan, and, since he is here to cast out Satan and his demons, he is obviously not him.

In his Gospel, Matthew called Beelzebul 'the lord of the dwelling' (10:25). In the Old Testament, he is 'the lord of the flies' (2 Kings 1:2). By whatever name he is called – Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons, or Satan – his power is broken by the arrival of Jesus, the one John the Baptist called *the stronger man*, the one more powerful than he (Mark 1:7).

In terms of the kingdom divided, Mark's audience would have been aware of the internal divisions that led to the fall of Herod the Great's quasi-kingdom. They would certainly have known about the infighting that doomed the Jewish revolt against Rome (66-70 BCE). And they probably cheered for the instability that came to Rome after Nero's death (68 BCE) when the Empire went through three emperors in two years. And they know that Jesus took down Satan.

In the end, in a conflict of kingdoms, it is Jesus' opponents who are blind to who he really is and to the work he is doing. They cannot see that they are captive to the way things are, that it is they who resist change, and that it is they who are aligned against God's purposes, perhaps without realizing it. They are in danger of God's grace bypassing them completely.²

Matthew's Gospel, in a different context, tells us that 'if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night *the thief* was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into' (Matthew 24:43).

Mark also used breaking-and-entering imagery to describe how Jesus, the more powerful one, broke into Satan's house, tied and bound the strong-but-not-strong-enough man, and plundered his property.

Satan's reign is ruined, leaving God's Kingdom as the only one left that matters.

The reading also casts some light on a perceived conflict in Jesus' natural family.

We wonder why they would want to restrain him, and we can think of only two possible reasons. One, they wanted to keep him alive; we know from last week that the Pharisees are now conspiring with the Herodians to destroy Jesus. Two, Jesus didn't call any of his kin as disciples. Would these be good enough reasons to restrain him? There is no way for us to know.

Notice that when his mother and brothers came to get him, the crowd was sitting around Jesus *in the house*, and *his family* was outside, which may indicate that things are different now.

Perhaps he *was* annoyed with them, but, in any case, Jesus used the situation to define a new and elevated kinship model: Whoever does the will of God is his brother and sister and mother.

In this new kinship model, one based on obeying God and knowing God's will, our loyalties now belong not to our tribe or clan first, but to God alone. The old family structures still matter, they remain in force, if we are all in the house together.

That's big news in first century Judea, and we are invited to join this new family too.

However, a skeptic may say, 'So what? Where do I go from here?'

In chapter two, when Jesus healed a paralyzed man and forgave him his sins, the scribes questioned this, saying 'Who can forgive sins but God alone?'

As far as the scribes are concerned, if only God can forgive sins, then they don't have to. They are bound by their belief. But Jesus will forgive sins.

He said that people will be forgiven for their sins and for the insults they utter. Sort of like the unbreakable vow in the Harry Potter films,³ Jesus said the only unforgiveable sin is to insult or abuse the Holy Spirit, which is akin to insulting God. Other than that, all sins are forgivable, if you only ask.

In his speech, Lincoln said, 'If we could first *know* where we are, and whither we are tending, we could then better judge *what* to do, and *how* to do it.'

Where we are is right here, right now. By knowing God's will, we can judge what to do, and by our compassion, we will know how to do it.

Amen.

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¹ <https://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/house.htm>

² Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006), 167.

³ *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltBlqwNZYJ8>