All this week contemplating this message I’ve been drawn to the image of the strong man. This is the image that Jesus uses in our lesson today for Satan or evil. Which is very interesting. I don’t know what you think of when you think of a strong man, but I remember as a kid just being fascinated by these huge men who lifted weights at the Olympics. It seems like they had that powder all over them from powdering their hands and they would squat over the bar, and then came the lift. Often with a scream and they would lift it up and when it was over their head there was so much weight on the bar that it would bend. Just these massive people, with massive strength.

Strength is mesmerizing: You look back on the way things used to be made, and they were usually made of metal. Even a little toy car was built in such a way that you could never break it. While I was on vacation I was out in this dock in Newport Or and there was fishing boat that we were looking at. And it just massive metal that went into building of the superstructure of that ship, it was just so massive and strong overwhelming.

Now of course there are many kinds of strength. But the strength I am speaking of now is the strength of the strong man. Overpowering strength. People who stand up in strong way with an iron fist often attract huge followings. The world today is increasingly ruled by especially strong men, and usually it is men as of now. Vladamir Putin in Russia is regarded as a strong man. These men can wield enourmous power and control at will. In the May 2018 edition of TIME magazing there was an article with this title, “The strongmen era Is Here”. Here’s what it means for you” And the article was about how all over the world, and even in our own country, nations are turning to the “strong man” form of government. Authoritarian.

Strong men emerge in a time of anxiety and great change. Covid 19, racial upheaval, racial conflict, political craziness, economic upheaval. People feel weak and vulnerable. So many look for a strong man to lead them, who won’t pull any punches and will just take over and set things right. You see these countries where their leader is painted on huge buildings all over the country. It’s all about his person. The strong man who will crush all resistance. Somebody has to take control, be the tough guy, Mr. Strong. So you see Putin riding his horse with his bristling muscles. He’s the strong man who will save his country. And the strength required is overpowering strength. Never show a weakness. The strong man. (make a face). Doesn’t really work for me, I just can’t pull that off, but we know what we’re talking about here.

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus is accused of casting out demons by the power of demons. They call him Beelzebul which was a pagan God that sort of became a slang word in Isreal for the devil. Jesus of course is casting out demon, and he is accused of being one. But Jesus says that makes no sense because if that were case then the devil or Satan would be taking himself out. How can Satan cast out Satan? It’s just logic here. Satan would never weaken himself. Satan is the strongman here. Always need to be strong. Never show a weakness. Crush all resistance. He’s this force that rules with all this power and control. So he needs to be tied up. Who on earth would tie themselves up? So in fact then, Jesus is saying he must be on the side of God binding the strongman. And it begs the question of course. How do you deal with the strongman? The one with this overwhelming power and control. How do you take on someone or something with all of this overwhelming power?

Well lets say you’re a weight lifter. And you want to take out the strongman. What will you do? Well what you’ll do is work out really hard and try to get even stronger than the strong man. Right? If his arms are 2 ft. around you’ll try to make yours 3 ft. around . What if it’s a country that has 5,000 tanks. Well, you’ll make 10,000 right. So what if that winning team practices for 2 hours a day. You’ll practice 3 hours. What if their offensive line averages 280. Well, you might try for 300. What do you do if you struggle with the power of anxiety or fear or depression? Just be stronger. Grit your teeth and just be stronger. And sometimes you know we begin to think of God this way. We like to present God as the most powerful, the biggest, the best, the strongest. Never wrong always right, knows everything all the time. Interesting in our Genesis account today one of the first things we find out about God is that he does know where Adam is. Isn’t the interesting. More on this in a minute. We can make Jesus into the strong man. Hmm.

That’s almost the whole context of the story of Jesus. The people of Isreal were under the power of Rome. And if you want to know what a strongman was, Rome was it. They could crush anyone easily. Huge army wielded by a man worshiped as a God. And Isreal wanted a Messiah who would have even more overwhelming strength. They wanted a strongman who would the strongmans game. Just stronger. And make Isreal the strongest nation. The greatest and most powerful. The most glorious.

This I think this is the core Issue in the Gospel of Mark. What does it mean to be strong? We tell people that a lot, to face a lot difficult issues in their life. Just be strong. Nebraska strong. But the question of course is what does that mean? And what does that mean to Jesus and his followers. We love the image of God riding in and conquering evil. But how does Jesus ride into town? What is his strength that binds the strong man.

Well, Jesus comes riding into town on a donkey to be crucified. Not to crush the strongman, but to be crushed by him. Wait a minute. Jesus shows his power by giving up power. Jesus binds himself, limits himself, becomes a human being. That’s what defeats the strong man. Satan would never lose power, Jesus just said that. That’s Satan all the way. I won’t budge an inch, won’t compromise, I’ll be as rigid as a rock. Jesus did what Satan would never do. He gave up power. That was his power. That’s the Trinity is all about. What does that mean to a world that is looking for God’s power and will? When we say, “be strong, what do we mean?” Try harder. Work more? Grit your teeth more? Refuse to give in more?

Interestingly, what follows is this fairly uncomfortable teaching that Jesus gave about the unforgiveable sin. Now when I was a kid, this was a big deal. Because if you committed a sin and you couldn’t be forgiven you were down the drain so to speak. Forever. And so we perked up when we heard about this. Now I don’t think that there is anyone who cannot be forgiven this morning for anything. Let’s be real clear about that. But in that light, this is no joke. We can blow this. This business of power and how we understand it is a serious business, and evil is nothing to be messed with. Here is the understand of this given by Eduard Schwiezer in his commentary on Mark’s gospel. I will quote him directly here. “This (this teaching of Jesus that there is an unpardonable sin) is meant for that antichrist who is hard as steel, who does not desire God’s grace, and who makes himself God). It’s this desire to be the strongman. This isn’t about weight lifters of course, it’s about a state of mind, a condition of the heart. It’s this feeling of pure overwhelming power over people. It’s bullying people, dominating people, intimidating people, bossing people around. The need to have one’s own way. It’s a blasphemy again the Holy Spirit because that kind of power is not the power of God.

We know this, even from the Bible stories we often tell our children. One of my favorites was always the story of David and Goliath. Remember David and Goliath. Yeah, the Philistines had this strong man remember, who could crush anyone. And no one in the army of Isreal wants to fight him. Why? Because they think that strength is about being even bigger and more powerful. They’re small and weak compared to this guy. But in God’s power he sends out little David with his little smooth stones. It’s something small that is the power of God right? Something that looks weak. But it takes down the strongman. And we begin to get the picture that God’s strength and power is something much different than what the strongman thinks it is.

Look at our second lesson today, second paragraph. So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure. Because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be see is eternal. Those of us who are older reflect the power of God in our aging. As we get weaker, we’re actually reflecting God’s strength and power and glory. God’s strength looks like weakness to us. It’s just inconceivable to the strongman, who always has to be strong. And then of course the Apostle Paul says, “My Grace is sufficient for you, because my power is made perfect in weakness. It seems weak to say you’re wrong or made a mistake perhaps. It’s weak to be weak. It’s time to take more seriously perhaps to reflect a little more deeply on the power of God.

The power of God, especially in the Gospel of Mark is the power of the cross. There is Jesus, completely helpless. Bound, not by cords but by nails. Put on that cross by those with all the power. There is Jesus small, weak, vulnerable, nothing like any power the world has ever seen before or since. Just a heart that beats for all the weak in the world, the powerless, the sinners, those who have made mistakes. The strongman will never get it. Faith always will. Amen.