

Amid the House Divided

1 Samuel 8: 4-20 Mark 3: 20-35

On May 1st, billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk had a major announcement event. Musk founded SpaceX – yes, it is rocket science – plus the all-electric car company Tesla Motors as well as partnering to create a company for solar energy sales and financing called Solar City. When Elon Musk says he’s got something to announce, people listen. In fact, what he was announcing was probably the most innovative, disruptive product that any of his organizations had yet designed.

In a video you can [watch on YouTube](#), cue the thumping rock and roll, bring up the lights, it’s a happening. Musk comes out looking bumbling and bookish, generally the best appearance he’s likely to muster. He’s clearly a brilliant man and speaks very well on most occasions. Yet on this occasion, he seems flustered. The music cuts out and Musk begins talking, saying that this is the first announcement of Tesla Energy. But he is continually distracted by shouts from enthusiastic supporters, groupies, eager to see the magic, ready to whoop loudly if he picks his nose or scratches his ear. Rather than staying on track, he regularly acknowledges them, and thereby encourages them. He also skips off on tangents on his own, and chuckles at his own snarky insider comments in a presentation that seems poorly rehearsed at best.

A lot of extraneous information prefaces the actual announcement which has Musk regularly telling the audience, “remember this.” After six minutes, he finally gets to the product announcement. Dim lights, dramatic music, and you’re shown a video of a small flat box, about 2 feet by 4 feet, mounted on a wall. It’s ... it’s it’s a battery. It’s called the Powerwall. It stores 10 kilowatt/hours of electricity and costs \$3500.

The problem was that it was nothing exciting to look at, and frankly does a pretty mundane task. It’s kind of like a closet for electricity. Imagine unveiling your special secret room that will transform your life and it turns out to be a closet. Now, ladies ... and gents, I know closets perform a very valuable function, and, living as I do in a closet-challenged home, I can truly appreciate their ... um ... performance. But like a closet, a battery is simply storage, not as exciting as unveiling an awesome electric sports car, or a reusable main stage rocket that can not only take-off but be landed on a platform. The folks who unveiled rockets and sports cars did their best with the battery, but it was still a battery.

The team that put together this presentation didn’t do Elon Musk or the product any favors. Just because all their previous product roll-outs could be jazzed up, exciting, and dynamic didn’t mean that you could use the same presentation model with a truly **mundane** product. These brilliant creative folks who put the presentation together were so enamored with what they’d done before, driven by the expectations they had raised, and seeking to make the product fit the presentation rather than the presentation fit the product, that their divided logic made a huge mess. Their blindness created a trap from their previous successes that caused them to miss the mark quite completely. They followed the standard model and formula, and frankly failed.

We've probably learned from our own experience that just because something worked well in one instance doesn't mean that the same results are going to happen in another situation. In fact, those kinds of assumptions are the stuff of great comedy. The differences become apparent rather quickly. It's why TV commentators are prone to saying, "Now don't try this at home," because past experience has shown that there are complete jerks who will try to replicate the same thing at home, inviting disaster. The same mistakes were made in the biblical era.

In the reading from 1st Samuel, ch. 8 notes how Samuel, the judge/leader of Israel, had grown old. Having handed off judging/leadership responsibilities to his two sons, the people of Israel soon realized that these sons were scuzz buckets, taking bribes and providing corruption instead of justice. (The two judges before Samuel, Eli and Gideon, also had sons who were scheming, sleaze balls. Apparently those called as judges were **lousy** as fathers.) Samuel's awful sons become the pretext for a delegation of elders to pay Samuel a visit and demand a change.

Samuel's sons really are no more than a pretext for the elders' visit. We know because the elders don't ask Samuel to remove his sons from their responsibilities. They don't ask for new worthy judges to be appointed. They demand: *Appoint a king to lead us*, and for what reason: ... *such as all the other nations have*.

Is there an urgent reason to make this request at this particular time? Are there armies massing at the border? Have they suffered great losses in battle? Are other nations renegeing on treaties? "No" to all of those. The 12 tribes have established peace through battlefield victories, and successfully negotiated settlements with multiple nation-states. Everything seems to be about as good as it's going to get. Yet the elders are unhappy with all of this good news. They want a change at the top, and they demand that Samuel make it happen.

Samuel is not at all pleased. He's taking it personally. But as Samuel prays about this, God changes Samuel's heart and helps Samuel to see that this is their rejection of **God**, not Samuel.

Samuel goes back and tells the elders what they'll be getting; their children serving (and dying) in the military, fighting the battles of the king. This king will make significant demands on their lives from top to bottom, requiring their acceptance of the king's own private agenda and supporting this king's wealth with their own resources. Samuel makes it clear that when God is in charge, God seeks a faithful, obedient people who get blessed by God on the battlefield, in the marketplace, in their homes and businesses, in their community and tribe. God's demand for faithfulness seems like a far better value in this deal. But the elders won't hear of it.

This move will divide attentions from the sacred to the worldly, compromising the historic sacred purpose and covenant with God by introducing the new worldly purpose and implied covenant of a monarchy. The division will create major problems that many would see as outweighing the beneficial aspects of secular government.

We have a different situation in this early reading from Mark's gospel where Jesus has already gained a huge following for his ministry that has been healing and driving out demons who cry out their affirmations, "You are the Son of God." His ministry has attracted the attention of *others* as well.

First, we hear that word has gotten back to his mother and family that he is casting out demons, performing miracles, and is leading a movement. They've gone to get him and bring him home where hopefully he will get these wacky ideas out of his head, because frankly he is drawing unwanted attention to himself, and therefore to them, too. They don't want to be implicated in his movement, or get swept up in the persecution that is sure to come.

But too late! We then hear about the teachers of the Law coming from Jerusalem, and they have a very different accusation, that "[Jesus] is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons, he is driving out demons!" Now you can see why the family is troubled. It isn't the accusation that's troubling, it's who is saying it – Jerusalem scribes.

Jesus doesn't call these Jewish leaders twits explicitly, but he may as well have done so. *How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come.* You jerks.

Really. Jesus doesn't defend his actions. Jesus doesn't try to explain what he is doing. Jesus doesn't describe how he is able to compel the demons. Jesus skips all of that and goes directly to the substance of their claim and shreds it completely, rendering it as a steaming pile of cattle waste. That's how you do it!

Then Jesus launches a bit of a parable, that in order to steal the possessions of the strong man, you must first bind him. Well, what is this about? The simple corollary is that the prince of demons is the strong man, and in order to take what is his, he'd need to be bound and contained. That would make Jesus a stronger man, or at least a smarter man. The basic point is that it takes the prince of righteousness and his sacred strength to bind the worldly strong prince of demons. No one but the one sent from God could do so.

Let's also realize that these demons are not some mysteriously violent evildoers like some B grade horror movie. We don't usually know what these demons are exactly, but they have a social ordering function. "The demons" separate the normal, well-behaved people from the ones who are behaving badly, who are possessed by demons. In other words, demonic claims and aspersions provided social definition of acceptable behavior while sanctioning unacceptable behavior. People who denounced the system and repeatedly challenged authority were not of sound mind, body, or spirit, and seen as not "normal," possessed by spirits, and cast out. Big mouths challenging authority were going to die if they weren't shut up.

Jesus' family is coming to get him because they hear that he has lost his mind. While Jesus is causing trouble for himself, they can see how it could go badly for them, too. They've seen whole families get wiped out because one big mouthed rebel thinks he's going to change things.

Jesus' family arrives and Jesus gets notified. Again, Jesus doesn't defend his statements, doesn't explain who he is, and doesn't attack his family. He simply redefines what constitutes the parameters of family. It's a hugely important institution, so his words are not to be taken lightly. He extends the circle of family in terms of faithfulness; *Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother*. It's a bit of a crazy statement to ancient ears, but it allows him to be "crazy" as far as society is concerned, but also the most faithful servant of God. If that's "crazy," so be it.

Jesus lives and ministers amid a house divided. He doesn't engage the dividers, those who would divide him from his mission, on their terms. He stands in his sacred mission and his spiritual calling to re-define what was set before him. The ways of the world were going to challenge his actions, but he refused to let them define him and his ministry. He saw their attempt to pull him into their worldview, but reached instead for his strength in sacred power and authority.

There are things that come along and seek to divide our attention from what is truly faithful and righteous. Distractions need filtering so that our strength in faith and spirit can stand out in our witness. The arguments of distracters can seem persuasive and logical and meritorious. But their truth, their justice, and their witness to the promise of new life will also be revealed in their weakness, if we're "crazy" enough to challenge that viewpoint and stand in the strength of the Spirit.