

The Stronger Man

Preached on the Third Sunday in Lent
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
March 7, 2021
Text: Luke 11: 14-28

Not only this week, but for these first three Sundays in Lent, our Lectionary has brought us readings that feature Satan and his demons. In Lent I, Jesus was driven out into the wilderness, where He fasted for 40 days, and then was tempted by none other than Satan himself. In Lent II, we had the Canaanite woman who was begging Jesus for help because her daughter was “severely oppressed by a demon.” And now, in this Third Sunday in Lent, we have Jesus facing the ridiculous accusation of being in league with “Beelzebub, the prince of demons,” as Jesus Himself is once again casting out a demon.

Jesus is battling a kingdom that has much sway on the earth, then as now. It is not a kingdom divided against itself, but thrives on dividing people and nations against themselves. The Devil seeks to sow discord, destruction, and death. There is a spiritual battle being waged daily for the souls of individuals as well as nations. We ignore this at our peril.

But this is an age that has trouble believing in the spiritual world, all the fantasy and horror movies notwithstanding. Malignant spirits are considered by the educated to be something in which people in a pre-scientific age believed. People in those days lacked medical and psychiatric understanding, so they attributed all sorts of sickness and mental disorders to demons. Nowadays, many believe that the satanic is just a personalizing of misfortune or bad behavior. We don’t really take the Devil that seriously. We like to dress him up in a red costume with tail and pitchfork, and make a laughing stock of him. We like to put him in cartoons or TV and movies where we can see him and ultimately control him. We domesticate him so that he can be safely ignored.

But in these purple days of Lent, the historic Christian Church simply won’t let us do that. In this season, the church brings Satan out front and center so we don’t forget him, so we have to take notice of him. Satan is powerful, as we see throughout the Scriptures. He’s constantly leading people astray, causing problems, and wreaking havoc wherever he can. In our text today, Jesus himself describes Satan as “the strong man. But if we take Jesus at his word, we realize that Satan’s only real power is to lie. He is a liar and the father of lies.

He tells us what we want to believe. We believe him when he tells us that our sins really aren’t that bad. We believe him when he tells us that we often need to do evil so that some good may result. (Actually, he would be happy if we dispensed with the terms “good” and “evil” altogether.) We believe him when he tells us our only job is to seek our own happiness. We believe him when he tells us that obedience to God and dying to self will lead to our misery. We believe him when he tells us that we can believe whatever we want, because all roads lead to heaven.

Ever since the Garden of Eden, Satan has been lying to us, speaking words that make us question the Word of God, tempting us to put ourselves in the top spot. “Did God really say...”—and we bite every single time. As descendants of Adam and Eve, we share in the pride of our first parents, and any parents here can testify to just how self-centered we are, even at the youngest of ages. Again, as our Lord Jesus says, Satan is the fully armed strong man. His palace is this world. His goods are the bodies and souls of humanity. But the stronger man is Jesus Christ. He overtook the devil by becoming a human being and living a life of perfect holiness and flawless obedience before God. He withstood the devil’s temptation to sin. He did not give in. His life was a life of total perfection in every way. By means of his holy living and his sacrificial dying he overcame the devil, rescuing and redeeming us in the process.

What we are witnessing in today’s Gospel is obviously not a civil war in the devil’s kingdom, but a cosmic war between God and the Devil, good and evil, right and wrong, truth and lies. It is the war to end all wars. It continues to be fought in the bodies and souls of human beings. It began when Jesus was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary and was made man. It continues until the end of the age.

There is no neutrality in this war. You are either on Jesus’s side, or you are on the Devil’s side. This is why Jesus says, “He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters.” A Spiritual Switzerland does not exist; we cannot opt out of this war. We must choose a side. We are either helping to bring all into its true fulfilment in Christ; or we are, however unwittingly, helping Satan maintain his deadly hold on humans’ souls and bodies.

This sounds like an awfully stark and simplistic way to view things in the modern world. Given the many failings of Christians and what appears like the Church’s condemnation and disregard of so many people, many are skeptical of the value of the Christian faith. They see no reason to make a decision for Christianity. “Can’t I be a good person without becoming a Christian,” someone might ask? Yes. You can certainly be a moral person without Christ; you can even be a person of exemplary character. Many people are acting in Christ-like ways without identifying as Christians.

The problem with this is that God does not just seek a world with moral individuals, whatever that might look like. Why? Because being “a good person” is not equal to being in God’s family. Being moral, even being a crusader for “good causes”, is ultimately going to come to nothing. If we have no destiny with God beyond just “doing the best we can” in our short time here on earth, then we are involved in a project that brings us no true joy. But, of course, God is not looking for moral heroes who are stalwart in their duty in the face of an ultimately meaningless existence. He is looking, rather, for people who want to join his family and become united with him through his son. We were not designed to be individuals who simply try to be good and then disappear into the night. We have somewhere better to be and someone better to be. Moral rigorists might impress on one level; but they do not really attract. People who love others are attractive. You become this way as you spend time in God’s family. We are to grow that family in the Church. If the Church is not making us into loving people, something is wrong. If you belong to Jesus, you are gathering people around him. If not,

you are scattering people into their various tribes and subcultures where they will most likely remain, having things their own way.

But this doesn't ultimately lead to anyone's fulfillment, but to their destruction. We were made to enjoy God forever. But we don't get that without dying to self and joining God's family. This is why Jesus says a non-decision is a decision against Him. If you're not with Jesus, you're impeding his kingdom. You are frustrating your ultimate end and probably that of those with whom you have influence. Therefore, as far as God's kingdom goes, you are either on the way, or in the way.

But when we belong to Christ, not only is Satan evicted from our soul, we also have a new Spirit. In fact, as St. Paul says, we become temples of the Holy Spirit. If a demon comes back and knocks on the door of your life, God's Spirit answers and tells him there's no vacancy. Your life is owned by Jesus and is under new management. Christianity is not about just sweeping out your house; it's about Jesus making his home there. Without him we cannot withstand the Devil. Your good intentions won't be able to stand against his attacks. Your own strength will not suffice against the strong man.

When Jesus hung upon that cross, crying out in pain and thirst, it looked as if he had been defeated by the strong man. But that apparent defeat turned out to be the greatest and most unexpected victory the world had ever seen, or will ever see. Jesus turned that death on the cross into our victory, making himself our champion, setting us free from bondage to sin, death, and the Devil himself. Jesus is the Stronger One who comes in and attacks all our evil foes, defeats them, and grants us freedom and life so we can belong to him instead. We are not only the battle ground; we are the spoil, the treasure. Christ Jesus has not left us alone in our weakness, but has come to earth and reconciled us with the Father so that his forgiveness, life, and salvation will be ours forever.

We no longer belong to darkness, as St. Paul talks about in our Epistle reading today. Now, because of Christ, we are light in the Lord. We are no longer enslaved to the thoughts, words, and actions that go against godliness. By his Holy Spirit, He empowers us to live a life that is different from that of the world around us, with different priorities, different values, and different goals. We no longer have to live a life of anxiety, concerned about our self-preservation. Now we can live for the God "whose service is perfect freedom," as the Prayer Book says. We have been saved by the Blood of the Lamb and so are secure in the Father's arms, free to live our earthly days in service to others, as lights in the darkness.

And make no mistake: as Christians, we do indeed contend against the powers of darkness. Though Christ has won the victory, Satan and those under his sway still resist. Being a Christian is doing battle; but we are not on our own. Jesus's authority over demonic forces shows that He is both Savior and Lord. Jesus holds the universe together by the word of His power. But he does not use that power to compel us to follow him. He asks each of us to choose our side. There are only two options and two spiritual kingdoms. Which one are we a part of?

If we choose the side of Christ, we have the greatest of defenses against Satan. And to help us do that, Jesus calls us to his holy altar again this very day, where he has set a banquet table before us, inviting us to partake in his very Body and Blood, given for the remission of our sins, and to build us into a community, into members of his Body the Church, with himself as our Head. With this meal, he strengthens us for the road ahead, uniting us once again with himself, and with one another, nourishing and strengthening our souls so that we can be secure in the household of our loving Father.

In the Name...