

Oculi

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St. Luke 11:14-28

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In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

One of the very important themes that we find in the Biblical texts appointed for Lent is spiritual warfare. And we can be sure that if our Lord speaks about it - as He does repeatedly - then we need to be listening and taking it seriously. I am afraid that we no longer take the devil and the fallen angels very seriously if we believe in them at all. In part, because Hollywood has done a great job of sensationalizing the demonic, sometimes even softening the devil's image for him. I also think part of it is that we have bought into the materialist mindset that denies what can't be measured. We can't see the demonic and therefore it doesn't get much, if any, of our attention. We are terrified by politicians, viruses, weather, foreign governments, and crashing stock markets. We watch hours of television and read endless articles about how to avoid and fix all these things. But the devil? Demons? Really? We seem to take them about as seriously as the Easter bunny.

And that's exactly how the devil likes it. He really doesn't want you to pay much attention to him or take him seriously. He is perfectly content for us to deny his existence and think of him as nothing more than that pretend little red guy with a pitchfork and horns who sits on your shoulder giving you bad advice.

But the Lord Jesus takes the devil very seriously and so should we. There are countless times recorded in the Gospels when Jesus drives out demons who have possessed people. They are as real as the people they afflicted and tormented. They converse with Jesus. A legion of them was witnessed destroying some 2000 pigs. Demons aren't neutral or harmless. In no way do they serve to bless those with whom they come into contact. They harm. They destroy. They sow seeds of despair and anger and lust. They divide. They tear down. They deceive. These are their works. That is why the Lord drives them out. They don't care for you or seek your actual good. In no way are they a blessing to anyone. They may temporarily offer pleasure or ease. But everything they do is meant to destroy and nothing else. Consider the manifestations of those possessions we read of in Scripture. Sometimes they are dramatic such as the man who lived among the tombs and was able to break chains or the man's son who was constantly driven to trying to hurt himself. Other times demons are associated with far less obvious symptoms such as blindness or deafness or, as we heard today, muteness - things

that we would simply dismiss as a medical problem requiring therapy or medication or surgery or a good psychologist. But always harm. And always with the singular intent of turning you away from and against Christ.

Truth be told, the devil is lurking behind every evil (viruses, disasters, war, hatred, dissension, jealousy, sexual immorality etc.) and doing everything in his power to use it to his advantage to destroy your soul. Just look at how he is using this viral pandemic to stir up panic and fear, to turn neighbor against neighbor as we desperately seek self-preservation. It is now a little harder to hear the Word of God and receive Holy Communion. In the back of our minds are now questions like "Will taking the Supper make me sick? Will the thing which Christ says 'Take, eat' cause me harm?" Satan will never let a good "crisis" go to waste. It is imperative that we take the devil seriously so that we take up the right weapons and resist him. We need to be able to correctly distinguish the works of the finger of God and the works of Satan. If we do not, we will end up like Pharaoh and those who foolishly accused Jesus of working on the devil's behalf. The devil isn't simply interested in helping you justify eating one more brownie. He has only one objective - to keep your heart, soul, body, and mind away from Christ and the Means of Grace so that you might join him in eternal judgment. We need to be ever watchful. Our eyes always need to be turned in the right direction - toward the Lord - and on the lookout for the deceiver who is a master of hiding himself. The consequences of failure are eternally catastrophic - far worse than anything a politician or virus could ever do.

Which brings us to the most destructive possession of all but the one that is the easiest to overlook - unbelief. Those who accused Jesus of being in league with Satan (who, as St. Matthew informs us, were the Pharisees) were, in fact, the ones who had given themselves over to demonic rule. They were Satan's servants, working feverishly to discredit Jesus, to deny the divine Word, to turn people's faith away from Jesus. Like Pharaoh, they had hardened their hearts against the gracious works of God and decried the mercy of God as demonic. It didn't matter that everything in front of them cried out "This is the finger the God!" They would not believe. The mute, the blind, the deaf, and even those with the more fantastic symptoms of possession were in far less danger than those who, like the Pharisees, refuse to believe what is clearly before their eyes and proclaimed into their ears.

Jesus had come, the promised Messiah had come, God in the flesh, in order to deliver us from our demonic overlord who subjects us to eternal death. He came to have mercy upon us all and bring us out of death into life. He came to give hope to the afflicted, the dying, the despairing. He came to set us free from our slavery to

death and the sinful desire of the flesh. He came to take away Satan's weapons - the Law's rightful condemnation of our sin - and bind Satan, hand and foot, with the divine absolution. These are the works of God. When and where you see these things happening you are witnessing the works of the finger of God. It is God who brings life. It is Jesus, who rose from the dead, who offers the true and eternal healing of the flesh. It is the one who came to serve, not to be served, who brings peace and unity among men. It is the Lord Jesus Christ who seeks not simply your momentary happiness but your everlasting good. It is Christ who quenches our hunger for righteousness. It is Christ who restores us to God. It is Christ who shares in our suffering and our sorrows and promises deliverance.

These works of Christ are completely contrary to the works of Satan. They aren't simply a different option. They have as their purpose the undoing of the works of Satan, the destruction of Satan's kingdom of death. Christ drives out demons and heals diseases because He has come to overthrow Satan's kingdom. There can't be both. We live in either one or the other. We are either with Christ or we are with Satan. To be in one kingdom is to be an enemy of the other. There are no other options.

By Holy Baptism we are brought out of Satan's kingdom. We are washed clean of our sin and our guilt. We are raised up from eternal death to share in the very life of God Himself. The Holy Spirit is bestowed upon us in Baptism and we are made children of God. And as children of God we are enemies of Satan, at war with him night and day as he seeks to overthrow God's kingdom and all who live in it. And thus every day we are on the battle field. Satan will not let a day pass by that he doesn't launch an attack against you. He may tempt you with thoughts of pride. He may seek to draw you into the darkness of despair and hopelessness. He may tempt your flesh with all kinds of different pleasures. He may seek to draw your trust to all different kinds of false gods - anything as long as it is not the Triune God. He will seek to dull your sense of need for God's mercy. He will deluge you with distractions so that you take no time for prayer or for meditation on the Word of God. He will convince you that you are strong enough on your own to handle his attacks and lure you out into open, isolate you from Christ and your fellow saints, where you are weak and vulnerable and easy to defeat. He will invite you to question the Word of God. He will attack your body and your mind and your soul.

Dear Christian, it is a daily battle that you are involved in. Your flesh will attempt to deceive you. The world will press hard against you. And you dare not let down your guard. It is possible to lose the life that you have been given. Having been swept clean of the demons that held you, it is imperative that you fill the house

with the things of God so that when those demons return they find no place to dwell. Instead, make sure that they find you safely behind the impenetrable fortress of the Word of God. Hear the Word every day. Memorize Bible passages. Sing hymns that proclaim Christ and the true faith. Pray to the Lord of hosts to send His holy angels to defend you against the evil foe. Feed your body and soul with the food Christ gives, His Body and His Blood.

And do not for a moment step outside the walls. Flee temptation. Do not give your flesh even a moment's opportunity. St. Paul isn't simply overstating the case when he says "sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness **must not even be named among you**, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place..." Think about the great precautions that we are taking to keep from getting COVID-19. And it is good and right that we do. But COVID-19 can do no more than destroy your body. Sin destroys your soul. Are you as careful and precautionary to avoid those things that lead you into sin? Shouldn't you be even more cautious? You have been redeemed and set free from these very things which pose a real and eternal danger to your soul. Avoid them at all cost and don't spread them to your neighbors. Your friends and coworkers may not understand. You will have to miss out on things because they are fraught with temptation. But it is a small price to pay. You are light in the Lord. You are sons and daughters of the Most High God. You are temples of the Holy Spirit. You were bought with a price, purified from these things with the Blood of God's Son, shed upon the cross. Do not return to them and plunge yourself back into death.

You do not need to be afraid of Satan. He has been overcome. His head has been crushed. He is a defeated enemy breathing his last and desperate gasps. He is only a threat to those who don't take him seriously and to those who attempt to face him without the only weapon that can send him fleeing away - the Word of God. Take it up into your hands every day. Put it in the hands of your children every day. Take up the armor of your Baptism. No devil or demon has the power to stand against it.

In the same way and even more so, do not be afraid of COVID-19. Take it seriously. Take the necessary precautions. But do not let Satan use it as an opportunity to steal the words and promises of God from you. Do not be overcome by a spirit of anxiousness, despair, fear, and unbelief. You belong to Christ and whether you live or die, your life is in Him. He is your Shepherd through these times. "But what if I get the virus?" You belong to Christ. "But what if I die from the virus?" You belong to Christ. But what if life is brought to a grinding halt?"

You belong to Christ. Do not react like the unbeliever who has no hope and who does not know the God who rules over all things in heaven and on earth, the same God who gave His only-begotten Son into death in order to give us peace and eternal life. Pray. Be attentive. Be informed. Look out for the well-being of your neighbor. But do not fear. Do not be anxious. Surround yourself with the comfort of God's Word in the Scriptures, sing hymns of life and comfort and peace. The hymn appointed for this month is filled with those very things. There we sing "Satan, I defy thee; Death, I now decry thee; Fear, I bid thee cease. World, thou shalt not harm me nor they threats alarm me while I sing of peace. God's great pow'r guards every hour; earth and all the depth adore Him silent bow before Him." And hear again the Words of your Savior "Do not be anxious about anything."

One day you will be able to rest. One day the battle will cease to rage and the kingdom which Christ established by His cross and the empty tomb will no longer be hidden. One day the strong man will reveal Himself in all His divine glory and Satan and his demons and those who have aligned themselves with him will all be cast into the outer darkness and the people of God will raise up the eternal victory shout and rest forever. One day viruses and demons and death will all be silenced forever, never again to trouble God's children. May God stir each of us up that we may hold fast to His Word and join the festal shout in His kingdom.

In the Name of +Jesus.