

Matthew 2.13-23
2nd Sunday after Christmas
3 January 2021
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

+ Gloria in excelsis deo +

Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's Gospel lands us right in the middle of the cosmic chess game played between our Father in heaven and that fallen angel Satan. And the play has reached a new frenzy. Or rather, there's a certain franticness to Satan's play. And you can't imagine how frantic.

For the assault on Satan's kingdom has begun in real earnest.

He'd been waiting for it for 4,000 years. Ever since that day in the Garden. What you hear as the first promise that God would bring about a salvation of the world worked through the woman's Seed—the promised God-Man, Jesus Christ—Satan could hear as nothing but a threat and curse.

For so it was.

Satan would bruise the God-Man's heel. And in retaliation the God-Man with bruised heel would tread Satan under His blessed feet, delivering a mortal wound: for the God-Man would not only step upon that ancient foe, but crush his very head.

And now that time had come. He who had no foot, no body, now became incarnate—enfleshed—in the womb of His Blessed Virgin Mother. The body that He never had, for God is spirit, He now did. The divine foot and heel that up to this point could only be spoken of metaphorically, for a spirit has no body, was now formed.

But maybe, just maybe, thought Satan, he could outwit this ancient prophecy, this foretelling of the mangling and pulverization of his head.

Because, behold!, God had come in great weakness. He who sits at the right hand of the Father in all majesty and power now lay in a manger. The One who feeds even the ravens when they call must now cry out for His mother's milk. He who had first uttered Satan's curse in well-formed words has now made Himself powerless even to speak.

So Satan must strike. And strike now. If ever the King in this game had been left exposed, now was the time.

And so Satan went to work like he always does. Magnifying the inborn wickedness of sinners.

Ever insecure in his power—even the secular histories tell of Herod's famous lack of self-confidence—Satan insinuated himself into Herod's mind and heart. What might have been the sort of normal lack of surety that any vassal ruler of Rome might have had Satan whipped up into a full-blown paranoia. Magi from the East had come to worship this new-born King. Wracked by his own political insecurity, Herod laid plans to ascertain the whereabouts of Him who came to bring Herod's eternal security. The first move on the King. Check.

But how in the world did Satan actually think this was going to go down—against Him whose Word stands forever, against Him whose Word goes forth and accomplishes the purpose for which it is sent?

Though mocked by the world, nothing changes the fact that it is wisdom from on high. Live according to God's Word, and blessed are you indeed, for He promises grace and every blessing to all keep His commandments. But choose to live apart from that wisdom at your own risk, for God threatens to punish all who do so. The world can tinker with God's Word all it wants—but it earns nothing but misery. Just stroll through the homes of our country broken by sin, the lives once lived waywardly now wracked by distress, the anguish of the self-serving whose deathbed is the deathbed of their own idol—themselves.

Surely Satan knew these things. Saw these things. How God's Word stands so firm and certain that far from bending, it breaks everything that assaults it, and dashes to pieces what sets itself against it. Pharaoh perished like that—in his self-delusional fixation on standing against a simple Word of God, "Let My people go!" So had the prophets of Ba'al been stricken dead and their idolatrous queen Jezebel—in their mockery of the First Commandment of the Only True God, whose fire consumes wood, stone, earth, and water. So was Belshazzar's rule brought to an end and himself killed, who refused to repent at those mysterious divine words, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN.

But all of those events—those were God just sort of warming up for this one. For the coming and birth of Christ wasn't the rescue of Jacob's descendants from slavery only, of one nation from idolatry, or an exiled people from a pagan overlord—it was the rescue and salvation of the entire world.

Satan should have known better. For one little Word spoken by the mouth of God can fell him—Just as easily as a Russian chess master can escape the Check of an amateur. "Out of Egypt have I called My Son," it was. No sooner had Satan opposed Himself to the Infant Crusher of his skull, than he was bested by that little word—a little Word of God tucked away in the middle of the little scroll of a minor prophet. And Joseph set Mary, the Mother of God, astride a donkey, and her Son, and fled to Egypt whence God would later call His Son in fulfillment of that Word.

Satan obviously had more work to do. For the moment remained propitious. The foot that would crush his head not yet developed to the fullness of its grown Man's strength. If through Herod's paranoia he couldn't muster an effective plan, then surely he could through Herod's vengeful cruelty, who had murdered his own children. Check.

But when will he learn? For even here, God's Word rises to the challenge and surmounts the attack. After all, the One whose death Herod sought in the deaths of all the infant boys of Bethlehem—He'd come to destroy death. He was, even in His infant frame, the Resurrection and the Life, the Truth, and the Way to the Father. Already His divine life had touched human flesh and made death nothing. For not only had God through Jeremiah foretold the weeping of Rachel in Ramah for her children—God knows all things—He had also said, "Keep your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears for ... your children shall come back to their own country." The death of those infant boys had been made the beginning of eternal life by Christ's birth. In the power of Christ's birth the grave could hold them as little as it held the Savior of the world. And in their death they *were* brought back to their own country, the New, heavenly Jerusalem. Herod's murderous rage didn't bring them death, but eternal life.

That's how ineffectual even Satan is, the prince of demons, against God and His Word. Even when it looks like a losing battle—the wily foe of mankind pitted against a mere Infant; a proud, prideful, angel commander pitted against the Son of God descended to earth in great weakness.

And in this there is much to learn, Christian.

For you are a Christian not of your own making or doing, but by God's Word. Your Baptism looks for all the world like a weak, little thing. But all its strength lies in God's powerful Word. And if Satan sets himself against that, it's not you, but he who will be broken. When Satan stirs your conscience against you—you've been so wicked, so evil, so vile; you can't possibly call yourself a child of God—it's God's Word that must stand, who has forgiven you all your sins. Who has removed them from you by His Blood and Word as far the East is from the West. And whose forgiveness, though your sins numbered more than the sands on the shores of the ocean, is greater. Bought by the blood of His own Son. And when Satan assails you with doubts, your doubts won't break God's Word, but will be broken by it.

That's the power of God's Word. So heed the advice of the Apostle: "in all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one, and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God."

Even then, Satan may not learn. But his head has been crushed by the heel of the Son of God, and His Word cannot fail you.

Amen.

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