

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Now [Jesus] was casting out a demon that was mute. When the demon had gone out, the mute man spoke, and the people marveled.” That really happened and the Lord did it. The people marveled, you heard, and in this marveling, there were different responses. You’re told, “But some of them said, ‘He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons,’ while others, to test him, kept seeking from him a sign from heaven.”

Jesus really did what is written in the Gospel reading today. St. Luke recorded this account for you. The Lord Jesus did something good just as he himself is good. Not only that but he does this by the finger of God, his own hand, which means the Kingdom of God has indeed come upon them just as Jesus said.

There’s great significance in what Jesus did and said as you sit here this third Sunday in Lent to consider what this all means. The name of this Sunday is “Oculi” which comes from the Antiphon of the Introit from Psalm 25, “My eyes are ever toward the Lord, for he will pluck my feet out of the net. Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.” That’s instruction for you to meditate, think, and take to heart, those words considering this Gospel reading. Your eyes are to be toward the Lord who will pluck your feet out of the net. You pray for him to turn to you and be gracious to you for you are lonely and afflicted. The flip side is deadly. Take your eyes off Jesus and you find your state worse than the first.

Listen again to what your Lord said. Jesus goes on in that Gospel reading explaining further what all of this means for the people, “But he, knowing their thoughts, said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls. And if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebul. And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe; but when one stronger than he attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his spoil. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.”

You don’t have to look hard to see divided kingdoms, they are everywhere around you. No, I don’t mean nations or earthly kingdoms, although you do so those as well. Here, though Jesus is getting at what you see, with your eyes, when you look at the world around you see the works of the devil and his demons are alive and well. When you look at the church on this earth you see all sorts of false teachings and divisions which seek to rob Christ of his rightful authority and rule. You look in your family and you see sin and division because of it. And finally, you look within your own self, your own heart and mind and you see the division of the old man who does not seek after God but instead sin fighting against the new man which has been recreated to live before God and his Kingdom in righteousness and purity forever. Your eyes look and they see this all both around you and from within yourself. Jesus said, “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls.” Moreover, Jesus goes further to say, “Whoever is not with him is against him and whoever does not gather with him scatters.”

Listen to Jesus. You are warned by him in all of this and with what your eyes see. You are warned to not stop looking at him. You are also warned against what you cannot see but is just as deadly. “When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and finding none it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ And when it comes, it finds the house swept and put in order. Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there. And the last state of that person is worse than the first.”

St. Peter would echo this in 2 Peter 2 when he wrote by divine inspiration, “For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved. For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our

Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them.”

When you start to think about this reading and what’s all going on the first or initial reaction is for you to get caught up in Jesus exorcising a demon. Hollywood likes stuff like this because it sounds exciting when in all reality it should terrify you. The reason this should terrify you is because this stuff is real. Demons are real. They were back then, and they are now and are at work in this world trying to destroy Christ and his church. One is either living under the influence of the demons, the devil and his kingdom or one has the Holy Spirit and lives according to the Spirit.

The warning of Jesus in the reading today is directed toward Christians, it’s directed to you. There’s a danger of complacency you let into your lives within the church, and it comes back to either neglecting or rejecting what was given to you in your baptism. Listen again to the Epistle reading and what God says there about our lives in Christ. “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. But 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, but instead let there be thanksgiving. For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not become partners with them; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true.”

God lays out the foundation that you are beloved children. He does this at the beginning of the reading and at the end when he exhorts you to “walk as children of light.” The devil is a strong man, don’t you ever forget that. His tactics are to lie and deceive you into thinking what God says is bad or evil and what he promotes is right and good and think your life is at peace. So, think about this now in terms of what you have been given in baptism which is what God teaches in the previous chapter to our Epistle reading. Don’t go back into what you have been delivered from by God in your baptism. Walk as children of light.

Look, though, at how easily we let our guard down walk according to the pattern of the fallen world. We let this happen and how much the state of our lives is worse than the first. We think we get our kids baptized, check. Get them to confirmation class, check. Get them confirmed, check. Everything is in order. But then the devil puts in your life other things. It won’t hurt for you to take that job where you will be working on Sundays, you’ll be taking care of your family. It won’t hurt to let them make their own decisions and be their own people. It’s not going to hurt your kids by letting them do and play everything that demand all their time and travel away for events and tournaments and teach them that the things of God are just one morning a week, when it fits your schedule. The devil wants you to think it’s just a matter of priorities or perspective and not that your faith can die when you don’t hear God’s word and receive the Lord’s Supper on a regular basis. Or you take your eyes off Christ when you teach them that despite what God’s word says about certain things they see in the lives of their friends, in their school or what they are taught in those schools and in the various media they consume they can be unharmed by them if they just “have faith” and whatever that means to them.

Jesus himself said, “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.” There’s no middle ground, neutral parties, or fence sitting. Either you are for Christ, or you are not. The devil though is fine with sharing loyalties. The devil isn’t picky, he’s tolerant of various beliefs and lives. God, though, is a jealous God and he demands total fear, love, and trust. We think our lives have peace, but the devil offers false peace. Only God can give the peace that passes all understanding.

Apostasy, falling away from the Christian faith is real. So is the danger of being lukewarm. Two times in the New Testament Jesus says those who are lukewarm, that is they are indifferent toward the things of God they are neither hot nor cold, he will vomit them out of his mouth. Turning away from Christ and fixing your eyes on sin is deadly. The Epistle reading also makes this clear as St. Paul by divine inspiration was warning the saints at Ephesus. They were Christians and he warned them as he warns you the danger of taking your eyes off Jesus in this life. He wrote, “For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not associate with them; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true).” He called them and you are called to repent lest you too fall away and see your state worse than the first.

What comfort then is there in all of this? Well, the reading today ends with these words, “As he said these things, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!’ But he said, ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!’” Your protection against all of this and the very deliverance is found in Christ who is the Stronger man who has overcome the strong man. Jesus has done this through his perfect, obedient life, suffering, and death for you in your place. Through the weakness of the cross, Christ crucified, you are redeemed and set free from the bonds of sin, death, and the devil. Listen to these words at the end of Isaiah 53. “Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.”

Blessed indeed are those who hear the word of God and keep it because it is given to you and covers you with his work and his whole person. The confidence to face the devil, who is strong, make no mistake about that, is that you belong to the Stronger man. The confidence to see your sin and stand up against temptation is that your Lord is the one who has overcome it for you and forgives you. The confidence to face death is because of the Lord who took upon your sin and died in your place to satisfy God’s righteous anger and pay the price you deserve. The confidence to know this has all been done and you stand righteous before the throne of God is because Jesus is risen victoriously from the grave.

All these dangers are real but greater is your Lord and the preservation and protection you have in Jesus the stronger man who has no one stronger than him or no equal. Baptized into Christ you have the Lord, and his Kingdom has come upon you even as you pray, “thy Kingdom come” in the Lord’s Prayer. The Small Catechism sums it up beautifully in both the second and third petitions of the Lord’s Prayer. “God’s kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity.” Not only that but his will is done in your life in all this for “God’s will is done when He breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature, which do not want us to hallow God’s name or let His kingdom come; and when He strengthens and keeps us firm in His Word and faith until we die. This is His good and gracious will.”

Dear people of God, fix your eyes on Jesus for he fixed his eyes toward Jerusalem for you. Listen again to those words of the Antiphon of the Introit and know where the Lord directs your eyes, “My eyes are ever toward the Lord, for he will pluck my feet out of the net. Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.” What a joy it is to have such a sight to behold in your Lord Jesus and to have all that he is done. Your sin has been atoned for, the devil has been defeated, and death has been destroyed. That’s who your Lord is and who places himself before your eyes as he has baptized you, given you his word, and feeds you with his Supper.

3rd Sunday in Lent—Oculi—March 3, 2024

You are his dear children, and he guards and keeps you in his Strong and Righteous arms which cannot be broken. Thanks be to God for such work and such comfort in Christ who does all things well and who gives you his word this very day. “My eyes are ever toward the Lord, for he will pluck my feet out of the net. Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.” Your Lord fixes your eyes on him and keeps you gazing at your gracious Savior and the salvation you have in him. Blessed are you in that word for yours is his Kingdom which no one can destroy and plunder now and forever.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.