

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

Jesus said, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it.”

The word Jesus uses for “keep” in the ending verse of the Gospel reading means “guard” or “protect.” That’s what Jesus teaches you about the word of God and your posture toward it. You are to guard it, keep it, protect it, defend it, and hold fast to it. Why? The reason is because you are under attack.

Jesus warns you today in this Gospel reading to watch yourself. “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.” 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 we let into our lives within the church, and it comes back to either neglecting or rejecting what was given to us in our baptism. There is a danger to fall away from the faith. This is called apostasy. The fault, though, never lies with God. God keeps you in the faith and guards and protects you. He does this through his means of grace, his word and sacraments. The words of antiphon of the introit today, from which the name of this Sunday is derived, orient you as you go through this life. “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.” In your life, fix your eyes on Jesus and don’t take them off him or it’s a Jesus said, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it.”

The danger and warning then that you are to see, mark, and avoid is how sin and the devil are trying to tear you away from Christ and his Kingdom. To be sure there are always elements that you are to avoid where the devil likes to operate as you think about the 2nd Commandment with things like satanic arts, or witchcraft as the older language puts it. Don’t mess with that stuff like fortune telling, Ouija boards, new age spiritual practices, or anything else that goes along with it. These things are resurging again in our country. Don’t touch them, don’t let your guard down. Resist those things and have no part with them.

But you see, this goes beyond this stuff as well as it speaks to your daily lives. 1 John 3 connects this as it teaches you, “Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God.” You are warned against the devil in your life and his connection with sin.

You see, that’s not who you are in Christ. Your sin doesn’t define you as a baptized child of God. God lays out the foundation that you are beloved children. He does this at the beginning and end of the Epistle reading when he exhorts you to “walk as children of light.” Look, then, how Jesus speaks today in the reading. 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.

So where does that leave you? 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.”

It’s been attributed to various people throughout the centuries such as Philip II of Macedon, and most famously Julius Caesar after defeating the Gauls in the Gaelic War. It’s, “*divide et impera*,” “divide and conquer.” Jesus today shows something similar when he is first accused of casting out demons by the devil. “Now he was casting out a demon that was mute. When the demon had gone out, the mute man spoke, and the people marveled. 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. But he, knowing their thoughts, said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls.”

See what Jesus has done. Jesus has and still overthrows the devil’s kingdom. Jesus says how he casts out demons and what this means, “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.”

Jesus cast out demons and divided the devil’s kingdom. Jesus has conquered and scatters the darkness. Really, Jesus buys you back, he redeems what belongs to him. Jesus is the stronger man by his obedient life and atoning death. The foolishness of the cross is the strength to save. 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.”

The Second Article of the Apostles’ Creed speaks to this when the Small Catechism confesses the work of Jesus for you. “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity.”

The stronger man has conquered. You belong to Jesus and in him you more than a conqueror as Romans 8 says, “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Jesus is your Lord, your redeemer, and you belong to him. The devil wants to rule you. The devil knows his time is short and so he is attacking. You see though, he has lost. His kingdom and spoil have been taken. You don’t belong to the devil now. No, your time is not short. You are a child of light and life, and your inheritance is the eternal Kingdom of God with all its glory.

The Gospel 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 and very deliverance are 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.

Blessed indeed are those who hear the word of God and keep it because 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. 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 rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it.” 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.