

Third Sunday in Lent; March 12, 2023  
+ Luke 11:14-26 +  
“Jesus is the Stronger One”

Jesus drove out a demon, which was mute. After the demon had gone out, the man who had been mute spoke, and the crowds were amazed. But some of them said, “He drives out demons by Beelzebub, the ruler of demons.” Others were testing him by demanding of him a sign from heaven. But he knew their thoughts and said to them, “Every kingdom divided against is destroyed. And a house divided against itself falls. If Satan is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? You say that I drive out demons by Beelzebub. But if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons drive them out? So they will be your judges. Yet if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

“When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. But when someone stronger attacks and defeats him, he takes away that man’s full armor, in which he trusted, and divides up his plunder.

“The one who is not with me is against me. The one who does not gather with me scatters. When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, it passes through a waterless place, seeking rest, but does not find any. Then it says, ‘I will return to my house, the one I left.’ When it returns, it finds the house swept and put in order. Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they go in and dwell there. The last condition of that man will be worse than the first.”

In Lent, many Christians choose to deprive themselves of things. If done for the right reason, in order to sharpen our focus on the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, this is a good practice. In Lent, many Christians meet during the middle of the week to hear the Word and to pray. Lent is just a *different* time of year, a more somber time when we hear a lot about sin, about repentance, and even about blood.

Even the Lectionary reflects the difference of this holy time of the year, one that’s set apart for a specific purpose. Not only this week, but for all these three Sundays in Lent, the Historic Lectionary of Christendom has brought us readings that feature Satan and his demons. Did you notice that? On the first Sunday in Lent, Jesus is driven out into the wilderness, where He fasts for forty days, and then is tempted by none other than Satan himself. On Second Sunday in Lent, we meet the Canaanite woman who is begging Jesus for help. Why? Because her daughter is **severely oppressed by a demon**. And now, on this Third Sunday in Lent, we have Jesus being accused of being in league with **Beelzebub, the prince of demons**. As Jesus casts out demons he is accused of being in league with the devil.

All this time with the devil and his demons not comfortable for us. It’s certainly not comfortable for me as the preacher. I’d love to come in here and preach to you nothing but sweetness and light, especially to people who have been kind to me. And that is why you should be thankful for the wisdom of your Christian fathers who assembled this Historic Lectionary. By choosing these Satan-filled texts to open the season of Lent, they compel preachers like me down through the centuries to be uncomfortable, and not to pick whatever lighter topic tickles their fancy that week.

And that's good. Because if we didn't have blessings like the Lectionary, we most likely would not stop on a text like this, nor like the others we've been hearing these days of Lent. We don't like to talk about Satan. We would much rather dress him up in a red costume with tail and pitchfork, and make a caricature out of him. We like to put him in cartoons and movies where we can see him and ultimately control him. And you know what? That's fine with him. He doesn't mind at all as we make him look funny or harmless or even fascinating. That way, we figure we don't need to be on our guard against him. We consider him no threat at all

But in these purple days of Lent, the historic Christian Church simply won't let us do that. In these days, the church brings Satan out front and center so we don't forget him, so we have to take notice of him. And while that's not comfortable, it's good for us.

Satan is powerful, as we see throughout the Scriptures. He's constantly leading people astray, causing problems, and wreaking havoc wherever he can. And in the end, he destroys and kills. The name Jesus uses for him in this Gospel is modeled on the name of a Philistine God called that means, "Lord of the Flies." "Baal" means "Lord," and "Zebub" is an onomatopoeia word for "fly." In this Gospel, Jesus also goes so far as to call Satan as "**the strong man.**" But to see he's powerful, we really only need to look in the mirror and be honest with ourselves for a bit. And when we do, we realize that Satan's greatest power is in his lies, lies which we've swallowed hook, line, and sinker.

We have believed him when he told his powerful lie that our sins really aren't that bad. "Go ahead and hold that grudge," he says, "it's not like you killed anyone." "Go ahead and indulge in that lustful image, it's not like you're physically committing adultery." "Go ahead and believe what you want about God. After all, if God is love, then love is god, and all roads must lead to heaven." "Go ahead and skip church," he drones on in the sweetest tones, "you've done enough boring good things this week."

Ever since the Garden of Eden, all those thousands of years ago, 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 as they did in the Garden, we bite at his lies. As descendants of Adam and Eve, we share in the pride of our first parents. As we say in our baptismal liturgy, we are "all conceived and born sinful, and so are under the power of the devil." Any parents here can testify to just how self-centered we are even at the youngest of ages. Satan, as our Lord Jesus testifies in our text today, is the strong man. He is stronger than us. And he has come fully armed and made our hearts his palace, breaking down the door with the battering ram of his powerful lies. Inside our hearts he and his goods would be safe forever. His home would be in us.

But something has changed; something is different, as we're reminded in this different time of Lent, the time of purple and repentance. The strong man was very secure in his palace, counting his treasures and plotting how to get even more out of us. And before he even realizes what has happened, before he can even hope to mount a defense, Satan the strong has been disarmed, stripped of his armor, and robbed of all his ill-gotten gains. One who is infinitely stronger than Satan has come in the most unexpected way, utterly defeated him, defanged the serpent, and deprived him of everything he had.

Jesus Christ laid aside his rightful crown for a time and came not in glory and power, but in meekness and humility. He came in human flesh and blood, was born in a lowly stable, and grew up subject to his earthly

parents. Then he went to the cross of Calvary, suffered, bled, and died like a common criminal, taking upon Himself all the price that your sin demanded.

When He 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 would ever see. Jesus turned that death on the cross into *your* victory, where all your sin was covered, all your debt paid, and his righteousness became yours.

In His death on the cross, Jesus made himself your champion, setting you free from Satan's mastery of your heart and life. Jesus is the Stronger One who comes in and attacks your old, evil foe, defeats him, and grants you the freedom of belonging to Jesus instead. You are not only the battle ground, but you are also the treasure.

Christ Jesus has not left you alone to fight or to surrender, but has come to earth and given himself in your place, so that his forgiveness, life, and salvation would be yours forever. When those baptismal waters washed over you, Christ was uniting Himself to you with bonds that cannot be broken. He was setting you free from the lies of the devil, and setting up shop in the now cleaned-up house that is your heart.

You no longer belong to darkness, as St. Paul declares about in the Second Lesson today. Now, because of Christ, you are light in the Lord. You are no longer enslaved to the thoughts, words, and actions that are out of place with the saints of God. By His Holy Spirit, he empowers you to live a life that is different from that of the world around you, with different priorities, different values, and different goals. You no longer have to live a life that puts yourself first. God has already given you eternity in paradise with him. So now you're free to live your earthly days in service to others, as lights in the darkness.

And that is how we must live. Jesus, who has fought and won control of our hearts and made us his treasure, issues two stark warnings in this Gospel. One is this: there is no middle ground. Either Christ has control of your heart by faith, or Satan does. You cannot have it both ways. Jesus says, **"The one who is not with me is against me."** You cannot belong to Jesus and play around with the devil and his lies at the same time. You cannot invite Beelzebub in once in a while for dinner and drinks, once in while crossing back into his lies and the sinful life he wants you to live.

Sometimes we think we can. Just a little evil is okay. Just a few of Satan's lies fallen for again and again won't hurt. Jesus warns so strongly against this idea that can have him in control of our hearts and still flirt with Satan's ways. **"Then in [the evil spirit] says, 'I will return to my house, the one I left.' When it returns, it finds the house swept and put in order. Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they go dwell there. The last condition of that man becomes worse than the first."**

When Jesus, the Stronger One, drives strong Satan out of our hearts, Jesus puts everything in order. He forgives our sins. He gives us peace with God. He strengthens us to live the way God wants us to. The house is swept and tidy and under his control. But Satan wants back into that heart. And if that Christian lets him back in, he will come back in and take control like never before, leaving that now-former Christian in worse spiritual shape than ever.

So we need to listen to Jesus and his apostle, St. Paul. There is no middle ground in the struggle for our soul. Jesus is the Stronger One, and he has our hearts. We need to hold him, and him alone, in our hearts. We need to listen to his voice, and his alone. We need to live for his will, and his alone. No more of Satan's lies. No more of his darkness thoughts and deeds.

But we hold onto Jesus with this confidence: Jesus is the Stronger One. He was the one driving out demons, not the other way around. And he said, **"If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you."** When Moses performed miracle after miracle after miracle for Pharaoh, plague after plague after plague, for a while Pharaoh's occultic magicians were able to keep up. Moses did a miracle, and they repeated it by the devil's power. But after a while, they simply could not keep up with the Lord's power any more. Finally Pharaoh's magicians threw in the towel and acknowledged: **"This is the finger of God."** God's has more power in a finger than Satan does in his whole army. That's why Jesus was driving out demons that day.

And, of course, Jesus points out the absurdity of those who were claiming that he was using Satan's power to drive out those demons. Satan does not drive himself out of any hearts. He wants to live in them and control them. But Jesus, his enemy, is the Stronger One. He has lived the holy life for us, died the sacrificial death for us, and driven Satan from our hearts. He has entered not by force and lies, but with love and forgiveness.

This is all we need to remember when we are tempted to straddle the spiritual line, living sometimes in Christ and his light, sometimes in Satan and his darkness: Jesus is not only the Stronger One, he is the loving and forgiving one. He is not only the winner of our hearts, he is our winner of heaven. So now we welcome him, and him alone into our hearts. We make a place for him, and him alone. We live in his light, and in his light alone. Amen.