

Sermon Lent 3 2020

March 15, 2020

Luke 11:14-28

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson, previously read.

As we hear this lesson altogether, it could seem a bit disjointed. We've got the description of Jesus casting out demons. Then there's this discussion of the kingdom of Satan dividing against itself. Then there's the strong man, and this image of the demon cast out and the house being cleaned with the demon coming back and filling the house with more spirits worse than himself. But you see, this all comes down to a simple understanding. The palace of the strong man is the world and the strong man is the devil. The world, ever since the fall, is under the tyranny of the strong man. And Christ is the stronger man who comes and takes over that palace, plundering the goods there. And we are the goods. Christ comes and takes us from the possession of the evil one and makes us His own.

In times like what we've experienced this week, what a blessing to consider. As we look at the chaos that has surrounded us in this time, it becomes easy to think that we are in a place where we should fear. What if we all get sick? What if COVID-19 becomes the modern iteration of the bubonic plague where vast swaths of the population succumb to it? What if the world collapses under the pressure of this illness?

I mentioned in my email that I sent to the congregation yesterday how odd it was making my usual Costco run in the midst of this. Seeing the aisle which is usually stocked full of paper products and a multiplicity of varieties of water was at a third of its usual capacity. And that third included no paper products at all. And as crazy as it was at 5:30 in the evening, the cashier said that when the doors opened that morning there had been something like 600 people gathered at the entrance of the building.

There's a tangible taste in the air of eeriness and panic. It's in a time like this that it feels like the strong man is maintaining his hold on his palace. Whether you are one who feels it because of the anxiety that can close in as our fears take hold, or whether you feel it because you can see the worry of the world around you, it seems dark.

But that's where we have this joy. Christ is our Stronger Man, He is the One who has entered into the palace of the strong man and overcome him. Sure the devil received great power when the first sin was committed, sure he seized the dominion of the world that had been given to Adam and he's been exercising that ever since, but when Christ came, the claim the devil could lay to having dominion was squelched. In Christ, sin was nailed to the cross in His body and in his resurrection His victory was declared. And with that the palace was plundered and the strong man defeated.

Luther likened this to going fishing. The weakness of Christ, the ability for sinners to so easily be convinced to crucify Him, this was the worm on the hook. And the devil grabbed on. And when He did, then he was caught. The hook was set, and he was defeated.

Christians, as we experience times like what we have now, that's our comfort. We have our Lord who has overcome the strong man. We have Jesus who has won the victory: the Stronger Man who reigns in the world, and who has taken us as His plunder, carrying us into His Kingdom, His eternal Kingdom.

It's in that comfort that we can view the stresses and anxieties, even the insecurities of this life. We have the assurance that no matter the chaos we know here, no matter the unsureness of what the days ahead will bring. No matter should we even lose our life here, we have the promise of the One who has won the victory over all the sorrows, fears, and over evil itself.

It's in view of that that we should understand not only this part of the reading where Jesus talks about the strong man and the palace, but also the house. Now of course, what Jesus is saying there is that when an evil spirit would be exorcised from someone, that spiritual home that is that person would have to be filled. Sure you could cast the evil spirit out of it. You could make the house look really good, but then it's easy for that house to be filled not only by that spirit, but seven more, worse than him.

And as we understand that, what's Jesus saying? He's saying that when the evil spirit is cast out, the "space" has to be filled with something. And what's that? Well, I said something, but more so, it should be someone. And I think you know where I'm going with that. Just as the spirits dwell in the house of the person in Jesus'

parable there, our Lord comes and dwells in us. He comes and He dwells there in baptism. We're filled by Him, Christ coming to us, dwelling in us in the water with the Word. Our being joined to Christ in His body and blood. Him filling us with His Spirit as He speaks His Word to us.

And you see, that's the need. If the house is just organized in itself, that's not enough. It needs to be occupied. Think of having an abandoned house. Sure, you can leave it empty, you can leave it pristine, but over the course of time it won't stay that way. So it is with the spiritual house. Again, Jesus is talking specifically about exorcism here, but I think we can connect this to some other things.

For example, I look at our culture. Since the end of World War II especially, the culture had a very strong bent toward that which is Christian. Even before that, there was a strong emphasis on morality. Whether it was the case then, or became the case over time, this eventually became *moralism*. By that I mean that there was a strong emphasis on being a good person. There was a strong emphasis on living and upright life, but that morality was not grounded in faith for many. In that morality, there may even have been a lot of discussion about God, generically. However, this wasn't true faith.

A book that I've mentioned before called *Christless Christianity* opens with an image like this. It says to imagine this extremely moral society, this society where everyone is nice and where no one drinks or smokes, or dances or cusses. In fact, in this society everyone is even in church on Sunday morning. However, at those churches, none of the pastors ever preach the Gospel. They never tell the people of their sinfulness and the joy that Christ has overcome this. Dr. Horton, the author of that book makes the point that this would be an ideal society in the mind of the devil. Why? Because it's that house. It's the house where everything has been swept clean, but it's empty, and it's waiting for the seven spirits to come in and take over.

I think we had that and now we are seeing the result. Look at our culture, it's gone from being one which in many ways had all its moral ducks in a row, but has gone to chaos in terms of families and values, and even morality. Ultimately, the house was not filled with Christ.

And that should be a warning to us as well. As we heard in the Old Testament lesson, we must always be living in the way our Lord seeks for us to live. We must

always be living in faith in Him, not just God generically, but the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; in faith in the God who entered into this world in the flesh of Jesus who bore our sin on the cross. And in that faith, we are called always to repentance. As we look around at something like the pandemic we're experiencing, that should always remind us to repent. Look to our own sins—not to the sins of these people, or those people, but to our sins—and we should repent. Like I said, just as the Old Testament lesson tells us.

And what does that look like? Well, look at the Epistle lesson. As Paul speaks to the church in Ephesus, he describes that repentant life there. The life without impurity, without greed, without idolatry. And as I say that, we could even say a moral life. Again, however, this life is always grounded in faith.

And that's how we must understand it at any time. It always comes back to faith; as I mentioned a few weeks ago, to that fearing, loving and trusting in God above all things.

And Christians, as we look at our current circumstances, we see so much fear and anxiety around us. But we have the One who is worthy of our faith. We have the One worthy of our fear, worthy of our love, and worthy of our trust. As we look to how our houses should be filled, we see Jesus the Stronger Man. He is the One who has cast the spirits who would seek to demolish our house. Likewise, we see that He is the One who has cast the strong man out of his palace. And as you doubt that in these times, look to the cross and resurrection. There you see the reality of this victory. And if you doubt that victory applies to you, don't. Look to your baptism, look to this Word being preached to you right now. Look to this body and blood of Jesus given and shed for you, placed in your mouth that you can taste and see the strength of this Stronger Man. Taste and see the strength of the One who has taken possession of you and made you His own that you need not fear now or in any circumstance. Amen.