

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT (OCULI)

“Set Apart for Redemption”

Our Redeemer Dallas 2020

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Rise up early in the morning and present yourself to Pharaoh...and say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord, “Let my people go, that they may serve me. Or else, if you will not let my people go, behold, I will send swarms of flies on you and your servants and your people, and into your houses...But on that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, where my people dwell, so that no swarms of flies shall be there, that you may know that I am the Lord in the midst of the earth. Thus I will put a division between my people and your people...”’” (Ex. 8:20-23).

“My eyes are ever toward the Lord, for He will pluck my feet out of the net” (Ps. 25:15). Those are the opening words of today’s Intriote, from which this Sunday in Lent gets its historic Latin name, Oculi, meaning “my eyes.” Our eyes are indeed turned toward the Lord, especially now that we are faced with a new global pandemic.¹ There’s a lot of fear going around, a lot of uncertainty. What does this mean, we may ask ourselves in true Lutheran fashion. What does this mean for me and my family? What does this mean for the economy? What does this mean for the church and for life as we know it?

As you can probably tell from the bulletin cover, I had originally planned to go in a different direction with this sermon, preaching instead on Ephesians 5:1: “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.” It would have been about how we, like children often do with their earthly fathers, seek to imitate God, loving what He loves. But we have this rebellious streak in us, which causes us to disobey. And yet, we are not just children of the heavenly Father, but *beloved* children, Christ our Brother having made atonement for our sins that the Father might be well-pleased with us. But when you’ve just been through a week like this, and when you’ve actually got a text with *plagues in it*, that seemed like a pretty good reason to switch gears.

A Redemption for Israel

So, in today’s Old Testament lesson from the book of Exodus, the Lord says that He will set a division, or a redemption, between Pharaoh and His people. Up to this point, God apparently *hadn’t* distinguished between His people and the Egyptians. When, in the first plague, the Lord commanded Moses to strike the water of the Nile, so that it turned

¹ The WHO officially declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on March 11, 2020.

into blood, there was blood throughout *all* the land of Egypt, “even in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone” (Ex. 7:21). Likewise, when He told Moses to tell his brother, Aaron, to stretch out his hand with his staff over the rivers, canals, and pools, and make frogs come up on the land of Egypt, and he did so, “frogs came up and *covered* the land of Egypt” (Ex. 8:1-6). The same goes for the third plague, the plague of gnats, when all the dust of the earth became gnats in all the land of Egypt (Ex. 8:17).

It appears, then, that God’s people had, for a time, been made to endure the same calamities as the Egyptians. They had *not* been set apart from them, but remained undivided from their enemies.

That is, until the fourth plague, when God said, “But on that day, I will set apart the land of Goshen, where My people dwell...I will put a redemption between My people and [the people of Egypt]” And the Lord did so. The Egyptians were afflicted with great swarms of flies, but God’s people were untouched. And so it continued, each subsequent plague affecting the Egyptians only, while the Israelites escaped unharmed,² God redeeming them from slavery and leading them safely through the water on dry ground (Ex. 14-15).

A Redemption for Us

A few things to take away from this. First, when things like this happen, plagues and pestilences, the godly do not necessarily escape.³ We have no promise from God that we will not have tribulation in this world. In fact, toward the beginning of Luke 21, Jesus warns His followers that they will suffer the same wars, earthquakes, famines, and pestilences as everyone else (verse 11). We are not immune from sickness and disease any more than those who *don’t* believe in God; but, for the sake of the elect, God allows the weeds to grow up with the wheat, enjoying the same blessings of sunshine and rain as well as enduring the same temporal consequences of sin (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43; 5:45). We must never forget that we are dust, and to dust we shall return (Gen. 3:19). That is why, in the only psalm attributed to Moses, Psalm 90, we ask God to teach us to “number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom” (verse 12), learning to fear, love, and trust in Him above absolutely all things.

We must therefore not put the Lord our God to the test, as the devil once tempted Jesus to do by setting Him on the pinnacle of the temple and telling Him to throw Himself down that God might send His angels to catch Him (Matt. 4:5-6). Among other things, God has given us our reason and all our senses, and still takes care of them. He

² Ex. 9:6, 26; 10:23; 11:7.

³ Valerius Herberger, *The Great Works of God: Parts Five and Six: The Mysteries of Christ in the Book of Exodus*, 146.

surely expects us to use them! Otherwise, what do we mean by asking for our daily bread, which includes things like house and home, all manner of goods, devout and faithful rulers, good government, health, and the like?

Nevertheless, even if we may be hit, those who trust in the Lord will come away better.⁴ For as the Lord set a redemption between Pharaoh and His people Israel, so has He set *us* apart for redemption.

He has set us apart in our Baptism, calling us out of the darkness of unbelief into the marvellous light of Christ, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6). He has enlightened us with His gifts, making us holy by His Spirit. By grace we have been saved through faith. And this is not our own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Eph. 2:8-9). One day, our souls will be carried to heaven, because Christ, who died and rose again, has already gone there to prepare a place for us, His beloved children. If it were not so, He would not have told us (John 14:2). But His word is *true*. He is the Lord in the midst of the earth, who upholds the universe by the word of His power (Heb. 1:3). He is “God, our Salvation” (Ps. 65:5), “the Savior of all men” (1 Tim. 4:10), our Rock and our Redeemer.

He has set us apart from our sin by His blood, shed on the cross for the healing of the nations. Isaiah 53 says, “He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows...an offering for guilt...that the many should be accounted righteous” (Isa. 53:4, 10, 11). Your guilt has been taken away, *far* away, as far as the east is from the west. So, “though a thousand may fall by your side, and ten thousand at your right hand, yet it will not come near you” (Ps. 91:17). Your sins are forgiven! There is nothing to fear. For where there is the forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation. “If in Christ we have hope in this life only,” Paul writes, “we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:19).

But God has set us apart even for eternity. Because of sin, our world is ever changing. Yet, we know what the future holds, because Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever (Heb. 13:8). “Fear not,” He says, “for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior” (Isa. 43:1-2). And that promise extends beyond this life, beyond the tribulations of this world, to the resurrection of the dead and the \oplus life of the world to come.

What This Means

⁴ Ibid., 146.

So, what does this mean? This means that we will not let fear rule us. We will take precautions as necessary, but we will not stop being the Body of Christ. We will hope in God, taking refuge in His infinite mercy, seeking His grace for the sake of Christ, who, as we'll sing in the closing hymn, is the life of all the living, and the death of death, our foe (*LSB* 420, st. 1). We will, with the help of God, strive to love Him with all we have and to love our neighbors as ourselves. And through it all, God will be with us. He will hear us, as He heard the cries of the Israelites and remembered His covenant with them (Ex. 2:23-24).

So, “do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Phil 4:6). Keep your eyes ever toward the Lord, who has set you apart for redemption. He loves you, and nothing in all creation can separate you from that love. “To You I lift up my eyes, O You who are enthroned in the heavens! Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, till He has mercy upon us. Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us” (Ps. 123:1-3a).

In ☩ Jesus' name. Amen.