

## The Stronger Man

Text: Luke 11:14-28

Hymn: "Lord of Our Life" (*LSB* 659)

Satan is real. Demons are real. We don't have to look far to find in our world terrible, inexplicable things which have all the hallmarks of the powers of darkness about them. And we are rightly afraid of things that are out of our control and which can overpower us. And I can assure you that if you were to go one-on-one with the devil or one of his angels, you would have no chance whatsoever. We mortal beings, who are so weak when faced with just ordinary challenges, have no hope whatsoever. So, add that to your list of things to worry about.

But we have been hearing over the last couple of weeks that if you do get into a battle or a fight with the powers of evil, you are not the first to do so. Just two Sundays ago, we heard of Jesus in the wilderness, facing Satan himself. The devil tried to lure Him away from the path of suffering to the path of self-pleasing, so that Jesus might not suffer for us and die for us and so we would be left without salvation. Jesus took the fight on not with spells or with fist-de-cuffs or with weapons but with simple, short, but powerful words of God. "It is written," He said. And every time he responded to the temptation of the devil with "It is written," just one sentence out of the Bible, Satan gave up straightaway and tried something else. There was no bartering or bargaining, trying to wrangle his way back into the temptation. Jesus' "It is written" shut the devil up.

After that, we read of encounter after encounter where Jesus either meets or has brought to him people who are possessed by an unclean spirit. Some, like the man in our reading are mute or otherwise physically crippled. Others suffer terrible attacks. Others are out of their minds. All of them are utterly miserable in one way or another.

And every time that happens we have a very uneven fight. The first bout between the person and the spirit was completely uneven: The spirit comes and possesses them and there they are, prisoners of Satan. Then Jesus enters the scene, He says a word or two, and the spirit is gone. And whether it is one spirit or a whole legion, at best they beg for mercy. "Please don't destroy us," they cry. Don't send us to hell. Send us into the pigs! You can hear the fear in their voice when Jesus appears.

And that is what Jesus is talking about today: "When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own place, 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." A stronger man, like an armed burglar or a pirate. And that pirate is Jesus. He came into the world to burgle Satan, to empty his house, to plunder what Satan had stored up. And what Satan had stored up were human souls.

You have no chance against the powers of hell. But the powers of hell have no chance against Jesus. Therefore, we have exactly two options. We can live in justified and rational fear of our ultimate defeat. Or we can live in completely assured confidence of our ultimate victory. Those are the two options. There is no middle way. Either we are going to be completely defeated and destroyed or we will be completely victorious. That's it. Which is it? Which do you prefer?

You see, what happens in the Gospel, what happened a long time ago, two thousand years ago in Palestine, the Son of God came in our flesh as one of us. He took on the fight with Satan on our behalf as a true representative, a spokesperson, for the whole human race. Ever since the Fall, the human race had been prey to the powers of evil and darkness. Even if you took the devil and his angels away tomorrow,

sin and death would continue to reign because it has corrupted our nature. Sinful humans give birth to sinful humans. And the wages of sin is death.

The presence and power of Satan, the presence and power of sin, causes above all this terrible affliction: the fear of death (Hebrews 2). If there is sin, if there is evil in the world, whether it is out there or in my heart, it rightly brings about fear of death, because, A, I will have to die. And it's not the unknownness of death that leads to fear, but the known part, the fact that we will have to face God's judgment. And, B, if we are evil or in the possession of evil, we have no hope. All we can hope for is the postponement of the inevitable, because when it comes it will be a terrible thing.

But when Jesus came, He didn't just wave His divine power around. He took on the human nature. And so when He stood up against evil, He did so as one of us. He did it for us. And in that battle he was completely and utterly victorious. There was not a single instance in which he was overpowered. He was not defeated when Herod decided to kill him. Though he was less than two years old and his earthly parents had no power or influence, the evil king comes up against him and loses. Satan himself faces him with all his craft and all his clever schemes and is defeated. Every evil spirit that comes into contact is driven away. Every instance of impurity is cleansed by Jesus. Jesus is utterly victorious from beginning to end. And the moment there was an apparent defeat in the hands of sinners, when He Himself is tortured and destroyed on the Cross, turns out to be his greatest victory, because by that death he destroys the guilt of sin. The very thing that had been troubling us from the beginning, sin, itself was buried with Jesus. So when Satan thinks he has won, he has in fact lost. Jesus plunged Himself into hell and dragged all your sins and the sins of the whole world and

all the accusations of Satan (and remember: Satan means “accuser”), left them there and came back out again, never to return.

The war has already been one. There is no more battling in order to ensure victory. There’s just one thing left which is for Jesus to distribute the trophies and prizes of his victory as far and wide as possible. This is why Christians, despite some rousing hymns to the contrary, do not march onward into war. What are we called to do in this war? Stand firm. Stay put. Where? In the mighty fortress that is our God. He is the mighty fortress that has already repelled the power of the enemy and so long as we stay in the walls of God’s kingdom there is absolutely no one and no thing that can harm us. If Jesus has been victorious, then all we need to do is be in Christ and we are already participating in that victory.

As it happens, so we are. We were baptized into Christ. Baptism, as Scripture declares, is our incorporation into, our union with the body of Christ. We become living stones in the living temple that is the body of Jesus. And if we are members of Christ, then we are already safe from all harm. Things only become dangerous if we decide to wander out.

Jesus already defeated Satan and has created a safe zone called the church, into which we enter through Holy Baptism and in which we live by faith, entrusting ourselves to His care. As long as we are in those secure walls, there is nothing that can be done to us. “If God is for us, who can be against us?” This is why Scripture repeatedly tells us to stand firm. First of all, to know that you don’t have to be frightened of anything. You cannot be possessed because you are already filled with the Holy Spirit of God. And once the Holy Spirit fills you, there is no room for an evil one. When

we stand firm in this hope, the enemy is always outside and the enemy is always impotent, powerless.

This is why Jesus gives us the parable of the unclean spirit that goes out of a person but comes back and finds the place swept and in order, i.e., empty, waiting for an occupant. May we never allow our soul, our spirit, to be vacated so there is room for other spirits. This is why we as Christians must seek to be filled with the Holy Spirit again and again. And by that I don't mean some ecstatic experience of speaking in tongues or whatever else happened to accompany the filling of the Spirit a few times in the Book of Acts, but to be filled with the Spirit in the way Jesus speaks of, to "hear the Word and keep it."

As we hear the Word of God, we are reminded of God's love for us, and through that hearing He re-teaches us to know the truth and love the truth, teaches us to lay aside those things we used to be very fond of but which are actually poison to our salvation. And so long as we continue to hear the Word of God and keep it, continue to be filled with the gifts of the Spirit where the Spirit has promised to be for us, which is in His Word and Sacrament, in the gathering of the Christian congregation in its life of prayer, by these we are being guarded in that safe fortress of God's kingdom, strengthened and made bolder and wiser as to the crafts and assaults of the devil.

There is an astounding promise in the Book of James: "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." If you saw Satan face to face, you would scream and run, right? A terrible sight. But Scripture says it's the other way around. Satan sees you and *he* screams and runs, because you are marked with the cross and the blood of Jesus.

Two friends were out on the town. One of them, diminutive of stature, small man, big mouth. The other, somewhere between 6'6 and 7', quiet, soft-spoken, wouldn't hurt a lamb, but frighteningly big. The two are in a pub and the little man gets into a scrape with a group of other customers, sees that he's ruffled some feathers, and so starts to put up his fists, and as soon as he does this, the other patrons turn white in the face, put their pints down, and walk out, never to come back. Why is that? Just behind him was 6'6" of gentle giant. For about three seconds, he thought he was tough guy until he looked back and saw what was actually going on.

This is exactly where we stand. We are small. We are weak. We are pathetic. But behind us stands a strong man, the pirate, who came and robbed Satan, took you as His own, liberated you from his prison, and placed you under his protection. You'd be a great fool to leave that protection. God grant us grace never to be so foolish but to stand in His strength until that day when evil and death and sin itself are destroyed and we are brought into the kingdom of joy and peace that the Holy Spirit has promised us.

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