

Safe from Satan

Text: Luke 11:14-28

Hymn: "Go to Dark Gethsemane" (*LSB* 436)

Somebody once said that the greatest lie the devil ever managed to pass off was to convince people he didn't exist. I think fewer and fewer are falling for it these days. If you think of the events that took place just 80 years ago in Auschwitz, where average people such as you and I, who had perfectly normal upbringings, committed unspeakable acts of cruelty, carrying out the torture and death of millions, as if just going to the office for the day and then having the weekend with the family, what can possibly explain such utter moral blindness? Or if you look at images of the rubble in Kyiv in Ukraine today, and you contemplate the fact that ordinary men, mostly men, who love their mothers and have good friends and like a drink on a Friday night, just like everybody else, can go to work to destroy the homes and lives and healths of countless people, what possibly could possess people to act like that? Of course, I could go on for quite a long time, giving examples from history, both modern and ancient.

Suffice it to say, as Scripture plainly tells us, there are dark, dark forces at play in the world. They may be invisible in themselves but we see their handiwork all the time. What else can possibly explain the deception, the blindness, the refusal to act according to what is clearly true and right? No, you don't have to start speaking with a strange voice or levitate or have your head spin to be possessed by evil.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus casts out a demon that was mute. The only manifestation of the demonic was the man's inability to speak. Nothing too supernatural

there. Maybe he just needed speech therapy. No, he did not. He had been silenced. And that was the work of the evil one.

The accounts of people possessed by demons in the New Testament are things for which we're tempted to offer an alternative explanation: a medical or psychiatric diagnosis. But when we stop to think about the spiritual implications, we see that whether or not we can give it a fine-sounding name or prescribe a medicine for it, all these afflictions are things that place barriers between us and our gracious God. David prayed in the fifty-first Psalm words that are part of every Matins and Vespers service, "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise." If you are unable to open your lips, if you are mute, you are deprived of the most natural activity that man made in the image of God was created to do, to show forth, to declare, to praise the works of God to oneself and to others. If your ears are stopped, and you are deaf, or your eyes are closed and you are blind, you are prevented from taking in, from marveling, from hearing and seeing the wonderful works of God, both in creation and in the declarations of His Word. If the stability of your mind is disturbed, you are unable to enjoy fellowship with other people. You are unable to comprehend the truth, the beauty, the goodness of God's world, perhaps even God Himself. And peace is replaced by anxiety. And so on and so on. Everywhere we see how God's beautiful creation has been corrupted, attacked, ravaged, and distorted by incursions of evil, whether they are moral evils, such as committed by criminals and tyrants or evils that aren't wrong in a legal or moral way, they distort God's goodness and His mercy and grace in the world.

So, if you ask a Sunday School student, Why did Jesus come into the world? One answer she could give is this: He came to take on the devil for me and for

everyone. He came to take on the spiritual powers of evil, to defeat them, to rob them, to bind them, so that we might be free from all such things.

Every time Jesus encountered the powers of spiritual evil, he challenged them and He cast them out. We might be powerless in ourselves to resist Satan. We might be powerless in ourselves to protect ourselves from the evil spirits or their evil works, but Jesus is that strong man who cannot be defeated by them or by any other power. He says when a strong man, fully armed, his goods are safe. But when one stronger than he comes and attacks him, takes away his armor in which he trusts and divides his spoil. Without Jesus, Satan is strong and safe and he has this world in his grip and us as his loot. But Jesus came to disarm Satan, to bind him, and to rob him. You are that loot. And you have been snatched by Jesus from the grasp of sin, death, and the devil, and placed into not just protective custody in God's kingdom but, in fact, brought home to your creator God, your heavenly Father.

And this is all been accomplished for you. In the time of his earthly ministry, before his final journey to the Cross, Jesus was working in a very limited area of the world, in a small patch of land in Israel, and whenever he came across evil spirits, he cast them out. But since then, that work of disarming Satan has mushroomed. He did not simply come to challenge individual spirits here and there, to help individual people here and there, but He came to save the whole world. To redeem it for God. So, He took the kingdom of Satan head on by taking into Himself the accusations of Satan (And remember that's what Satan means: Accuser). And all the accusations of Satan against you Jesus assumed into Himself. It is as if Jesus came to say to the devil, If you have a beef with mankind, talk to Me. I'm here to represent all of mankind. If you

want to deal with them, you have to go through me. And so Jesus to silence the accusations, He suffered their just consequence, and having done *that* they were done *with*. And by his resurrection, he burst through the prison gates and bursting through he “led a host of captives into liberty.”

Every time a person is baptized into the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, God stakes His claim on that person and says, “He is mine.” “She is mine.” No one else’s. God thereby redeems and rescues that person from the grip of sin, death, and the devil and makes him his own. We were all born into sin, into bondage to sin, but the moment that God placed His name on you, you were redeemed and rescued and no longer a slave. You became a child of God.

And sometimes still today in this world these exorcisms take place in a way that would have been similar to the ones Jesus carried out in his earthly ministry. Possessions by spirits can still have these extraordinary manifestations and they come out with big noises and crying out and convulsing people. It still happens. In fact, one of our sister churches in Africa, the Malagasy Lutheran Church in Madagascar, have had this lay movement called the shepherd movement, where trained lay people go out in groups of two or three, from village to village, where people live in fear of the spirits. They invite people to come and hear of Jesus and offer to chase out the evil spirits of which they are afraid. When they are so exorcised, they are brought to baptism and then instructed in God’s Word. Everywhere this happens it has brought freedom and joy to people living in fear and anxiety, a freedom that only Christ can bring.

Now not many of you will have had experiences like that in your life. It seems that Satan is good at adapting to his environment. He deceives us in different ways.

But each of you has been freed from the power of evil, from the power of the evil one. The power then is the same power today. It's the power of God's Word. Because in God's Word Jesus makes himself present and operates. When a few moments ago you received absolution, it was the words of God that brought you forgiveness, because in those words Jesus himself came to you to forgive you. When we hear in God's Word, "Blessed rather are those who hear the Word of God and keep it," those words are addressed to you. When you hear the Word of God, when you guard it and hold on to it, then you are secure within God's kingdom. That word brings to you Jesus. That word drives out all powers of evil. That word is able to give you that faith through which we receive forgiveness of sins, righteousness before God.

And so there is no more urgent task for the Christian than to busy himself in the Word of God. In our day and age, there are many distractions, perhaps more distractions than in past days. At the same time, there are so many more opportunities to hear God's Word. It no longer costs, as it did when Luther was growing up, as much as a house to buy a Bible. You don't have to go to a literate priest to have the Word of God read to you. You can read it in your own home. If you don't know where to start, we have a reading schedule for you, so you don't even have to decide which way to read it. There are Bible studies, both in church and online.

Almost everywhere you look there are opportunities to hear God's Word, and when we hear God's Word we are placing ourselves in Jesus' path. Jesus begins to work on us as He did during his earthly ministry. And when we seek the help of the church, we are being gathered, because where the church is faithfully working, it is working with Jesus, gathering to Him His flock. There are others that seek to scatter—

false teachers and the many misleading distractions of the world against which Paul warns us, “worldly desires and seeking after pleasure.” But when we hear the Word of God and keep it, we are blessed. We’re blessed by God Himself. And what Jesus is saying here is that we are blessed more than Mary was blessed in bearing Jesus. We’re more blessed when we hear His Word, because in that Word He comes to us, He makes His Home with us, and He puts on us like a robe or a suit His own righteousness. And when we’re clothed with the righteousness of Christ and His Spirit is given to us, we are made safe from all the powers of evil. We are fitted with an impenetrable armor that none of the weapons of Satan can pierce.

Dear saints, we are privileged beyond words that our gracious heavenly Father has had mercy on us, that He sent His Son to save us and the whole world, and that He has granted us the gift of His Word. That word is still here today. In spite of our all unfaithfulness, all our hardheartedness, all the ways in which we fail to honor Him and appreciate His gifts, He still comes to us. He still feeds us. He still guides us. He’s faithful. And he will bring to completion the work that He has begun in us. “Blessed are you who hear the Word of God and keep it.”

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