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## Lent 3 One Year Series 2017

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Lent III (Oculi)

### **Collect of the Day**

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy, be gracious to all who have gone astray from Your ways and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of Your Word; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*In our situations, if God were to answer this prayer, what would we expect to happen? Do we see this globally, missionally? Do we expect that all of humanity would fit into this “gone astray” category and needs to return with penitent hearts? But that is a tough thing to say. All is a difficult idea – it certainly includes some folks we don’t like. Does it include folks we like very much, including ourselves? Of course. One can sit in church on Sunday and not really be there. Church itself can become a place of profound spiritual distraction so that we never even catch a glimpse of God there. The preacher, however, may also want to have a specific audience in mind. Why have they strayed? Is it only because of their sins? Is it because of injustice? Is it because of the sins of the church and this community? Are we talking about the children of the members of this parish? Are there some who are kept from Jesus (lost) because of things which are totally out of their control?*

*If you want to have some fun with this collect, choose to sing “O Christ our Light, O Radiance True” (LW #314, LSB #839) as a hymn in the service. There is a great hook in this for the preacher to use. The prolific Lutheran hymn writer Johann Heermann did not originate the idea for this hymn. He got it from a poem he picked up from a book. He did not realize, however, the poem was written by a Jesuit named Peter Brilmacher. When Brilmacher wrote about people who were estranged from God, he was talking about Lutherans and other Protestants. It is on them (us!) that he prayed for the light of Christ to shine. There is more than a touch of irony here and I have to smile whenever I hear Lutherans lustily singing this favorite mission hymn, probably thinking about some aborigine or reprobate. The poem was originally about us!*

*You might also want to think about that opening phrase in which the prayer says that the glory of God is always to have mercy. In Greek this is pronounced “Doxa” as in doxology which largely corresponds to the English understanding of glory and praise. In the Hebrew, however, the word for glory is “cabod” and it does not really mean “glory” in the sense that most people think of it. The word actually means “fat” and at its root really conveys “heavy” or “significant.” Etymologists speculate that the wealthy or important folks in the village were the only ones who could afford the extra calories to put on weight. In truth in many cultures, heavy people are assumed to be important. I read once that Polynesians expected their royalty to be very overweight.*

*This idea then gets associated with our more traditional ideas about glory being the glorious light or something like that comes because the only people who were heavy in that protein deficient society were the wealthy, who could afford the nice clothes, jewelry, etc. This has real*

*ramifications when one comes to the idea of God's glory, especially when it uses this Hebrew vocable. The glory of God is about incarnational presence, not his brilliance, his light, or his "otherworldliness." In the Exodus story He causes his name to go before the people of Israel and the glory of the Lord is what they see. He causes his name to dwell in the temple to forgive sins, the people see the glory of God. When Jesus is born, the glory of the Lord shone around the angels. Many theologians have noticed that the Name of God in the OT is perhaps the pre-incarnate Christ. When the glory of God shows up, it is not a power event, but an incarnational grace event.*

*The glory of God is always to have mercy. Real power, real strength, real majesty is not reactive, but proactive. God is impressively impassive before all our attempts to buy from him. His favor is simply not for sale, but it is freely given. This is the glory of God. He gives his mercy freely to those in need.*

*We ask him to be gracious to all those who have gone astray from His ways. This merits a little attention. Who is this? Is it everyone? Is it the people who have abandoned the faith? Is it the vast majority of Lutheran confirmands who make their vows and then disappear for years, perhaps to return with a child and spouse in tow, perhaps never to return to any church? Is this about the people living under the bridges or sunk in some alcoholic stupor or narcotic haze? Is it simply a way to talk about every sinner? It could be any of them; it could be all of them. The preacher will want to think about this. To identify them as people "out there" might be on one level honest, but it might also feed that natural human predilection to pride. The prayer might be spoken like the Pharisee in the parable by Jesus.*

*We want them to come with penitent hearts and steadfast faith. Is there a difference? What is it? Or is this really a way of saying the same thing?*

*We want them to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of God's Word, that would be Jesus, don't you think? Is this embracing and holding fast really the same thing as the penitential heart and steadfast faith? Are these really just four phrases which describe the same amazing relationship which we proclaimed last week in the story about Abraham? I tend to think so. See these not as progressions but in parallels. Thus penitent hearts, steadfast faith, embracing the Word, holding fast to the Word are each different descriptions of the same thing – humble faith.*

## **Readings**

Exodus 8:16-24

<sup>16</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth, so that it may become gnats in all the land of Egypt.'" <sup>17</sup> And they did so. Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff and struck the dust of the earth, and there were gnats on man and beast. All the dust of the earth became gnats in all the land of Egypt. <sup>18</sup> The magicians tried by their secret arts to produce gnats, but they could not. So there were gnats on man and beast.

<sup>19</sup> Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, “This is the finger of God.” But Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.

<sup>20</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, “Rise up early in the morning and present yourself to Pharaoh, as he goes out to the water, and say to him, ‘Thus says the LORD, “Let my people go, that they may serve me. <sup>21</sup> 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. And the houses of the Egyptians shall be filled with swarms of flies, and also the ground on which they stand. <sup>22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> Thus I will put a division between my people and your people. Tomorrow this sign shall happen.’”” <sup>24</sup> And the LORD did so. There came great swarms of flies into the house of Pharaoh and into his servants' houses. Throughout all the land of Egypt the land was ruined by the swarms of flies.

<sup>25</sup> *Then Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron and said, “Go, sacrifice to your God within the land.”*  
<sup>26</sup> *But Moses said, “It would not be right to do so, for the offerings we shall sacrifice to the LORD our God are an abomination to the Egyptians. If we sacrifice offerings abominable to the Egyptians before their eyes, will they not stone us? <sup>27</sup> We must go three days' journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to the LORD our God as he tells us.”* <sup>28</sup> *So Pharaoh said, “I will let you go to sacrifice to the LORD your God in the wilderness; only you must not go very far away. Plead for me.”* <sup>29</sup> *Then Moses said, “Behold, I am going out from you and I will plead with the LORD that the swarms of flies may depart from Pharaoh, from his servants, and from his people, tomorrow. Only let not Pharaoh cheat again by not letting the people go to sacrifice to the LORD.”* <sup>30</sup> *So Moses went out from Pharaoh and prayed to the LORD. <sup>31</sup> And the LORD did as Moses asked, and removed the swarms of flies from Pharaoh, from his servants, and from his people; not one remained. <sup>32</sup> But Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and did not let the people go.*

*I have extended this reading to give you a little better sense of where this is going. We are in the middle of the ten plagues which God worked through Moses against the Egyptians. First God turned the waters of Egypt to blood, forcing the Egyptians to dig wells next to the Nile so the sand would filter the water. Then, after a week of bloody water, the land was inundated by frogs. Both of those miracles were replicated by the magicians of Pharaoh's house.*

*We get the third plague – gnats. This one the magicians cannot repeat and they, like the enemies of Christ in the NT, attest to the truth. “This is the finger of God.” Of course, the first two were as well, but now it is getting to be more evident.*

*In the face of God's power and judgment, however, Pharaoh hardens his heart. This has long been a criticism of God that has circulated in certain circles. Doesn't God love everyone? How could he have hardened Pharaoh's heart? I am not in a position to explain God's motives or his ways. I am in a position to question whether we can even pose the accusation against God. My guess is that your congregation will not have a lot of people who are troubled by this phrase. Indeed, most Christians are not. However, sometimes you have someone who has read in these circles and rather believes that by raising this issue*

*they have introduced some conundrum to the discussion which cannot be answered. I find this rather juvenile, but the preacher should probably be ready to say something.*

*While elsewhere in Scripture, it speaks of God hardening Pharaoh's heart, here it seems to be self-inflicted. But even those passages in which it attributes the hardening to God, I don't really have a problem with it. God is not necessarily beholden to my concept of morality, even if that morality is guided by his Word. The government which makes murder a felony might well and legitimately turn around and execute the guilty. This is a sort of judicial murder. But because it is the one who makes the laws who does it, and because it too is done in the strictures of justice, we think this is very different. God has enjoined me to love all, even enemies. I am not sure God is bound by that same rule. What is more, I am not able to see into a man or woman's heart. What God saw in Pharaoh's heart is obscure to me. I trust his judgment on that.*

**Sermon Idea:** The Great Contest (That the Holy Spirit give strength and conviction to the hearer's repentance and call the hearer to faithful trust in God's promise of gracious aid.)

This is Lent – God brings judgment. We are returned the building blocks of our Christianity.

The Christian who is honest with himself or herself will recognize this hard hearted pharaoh. The old man or woman who contends with the new man is incorrigible. God comes with proofs, love, evidence, and much more. But he will not let go of his self-sought ways or grasping for power, even when they come through lies and deceit. There is only one thing to do with this old man – kill him. Show no mercy. Bring him to the water, the Red Sea of Baptism, and drown him with all his forces and henchmen. Don't feel badly about this violence. There comes a time when righteous and holy war must be waged against that old stinker. He has to be put out, slain. We must push his face beneath the water and hold him there until the bubbles stop.

This is the daily struggle for the Christian. We dare not go soft on this, giving him another chance. He will give no quarter and show no mercy when he has the upper hand. This is not a struggle according to rules of the Geneva Convention. This is a struggle to the death.

Too often we have waged the feeblest sort of rear guard action as the old man has claimed more and more of territory which comprises our lives. We have given over the finances to selfish concerns and faithless hoarding and spending. We have not trusted God, but ourselves in this regard and the old man wins another part of us. We have not attacked our predilection to lust or gossip or complaining. We know it's wrong, but we shrug our shoulders and ask our neighbor to put up with it while its acid corrodes our soul. Our battles against this foe are little more than the weak flailing of an old fool, not the sturdy strokes of a warrior who has girded himself for battle and trained for this.

Praise God, he has mercy on his people. The gnats don't go to Goshen. He makes a distinction. As Paul finally wonders in chapter 7 of Romans, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" He immediately gives the answer: "Praise be to God through the Lord Jesus Christ!" I cannot hope to prevail in this battle. The foe is too strong for me. My old sinful flesh, this depraved me, has infected every fiber of my being. Jesus's strength and virtue will have to be my bulwark and only hope. The people will walk through that water following a pillar of fire and cloud. God confounds the Egyptians and he rescues the people from this hard hearted fellow.

The plagues of Egypt are not only directed at the Egyptians, but also to the people of Israel. They have also failed in their lives. The plagues move from one Egyptian god to another. The Nile was a god to the

Egyptians. Another was a frog god, another a lord of flies. But God is really in charge and he humbles the deities of Egypt. Likewise we should expect him to humble the things into which we have misplaced our trust. God will not take second place anyone. He is not only taking the Israelites out of Egypt, but he is taking Egypt out of the Israelites.

But this battle is not over and it will go on for years. Pharaoh will drown in the Red Sea, but the poisonous heart will rise again and again in the people of Israel. Forty long and sometimes difficult years they will wander the wilderness on their way to a promised land. A life of purity and godly devotion must be fed with his manna and follow him on strange and difficult paths. It is a mighty struggle in which we engage and it will take our whole lives, every day and every decision we make. Sometimes we will lose a step, sometimes by the grace of God we will make a step, but lying down in the sand and pretending that this fight doesn't happen is never an option. That is just giving up and letting the old man have his way. God is not satisfied with that and neither can you be.

Or Jeremiah 26:1-15

In the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, this word came from the LORD: <sup>2</sup>“Thus says the LORD: Stand in the court of the LORD's house, and speak to all the cities of Judah that come to worship in the house of the LORD all the words that I command you to speak to them; do not hold back a word. <sup>3</sup>It may be they will listen, and every one turn from his evil way, that I may relent of the disaster that I intend to do to them because of their evil deeds. <sup>4</sup>You shall say to them, ‘Thus says the LORD: If you will not listen to me, to walk in my law that I have set before you, <sup>5</sup>and to listen to the words of my servants the prophets whom I send to you urgently, though you have not listened, <sup>6</sup>then I will make this house like Shiloh, and I will make this city a curse for all the nations of the earth.’”

<sup>7</sup>The priests and the prophets and all the people heard Jeremiah speaking these words in the house of the LORD. <sup>8</sup>And when Jeremiah had finished speaking all that the LORD had commanded him to speak to all the people, then the priests and the prophets and all the people laid hold of him, saying, “You shall die! <sup>9</sup>Why have you prophesied in the name of the LORD, saying, ‘This house shall be like Shiloh, and this city shall be desolate, without inhabitant’?” And all the people gathered around Jeremiah in the house of the LORD.

<sup>10</sup>When the officials of Judah heard these things, they came up from the king's house to the house of the LORD and took their seat in the entry of the New Gate of the house of the LORD.

<sup>11</sup>Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and to all the people, “This man deserves the sentence of death, because he has prophesied against this city, as you have heard with your own ears.”

<sup>12</sup>Then Jeremiah spoke to all the officials and all the people, saying, “The LORD sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the words you have heard. <sup>13</sup>Now therefore mend your ways and your deeds, and obey the voice of the LORD your God, and the LORD will relent of the disaster that he has pronounced against you. <sup>14</sup>But as for me, behold, I am in your hands. Do with me as seems good and right to you. <sup>15</sup>Only know for certain that if you put me to death, you

will bring innocent blood upon yourselves and upon this city and its inhabitants, for in truth the LORD sent me to you to speak all these words in your ears.”

<sup>16</sup> Then the officials and all the people said to the priests and the prophets, “This man does not deserve the sentence of death, for he has spoken to us in the name of the LORD our God.” <sup>17</sup> And certain of the elders of the land arose and spoke to all the assembled people, saying, <sup>18</sup> “Micah of Moresheth prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah, and said to all the people of Judah: ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts,

“‘Zion shall be plowed as a field;  
Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,  
and the mountain of the house a wooded height.’

<sup>19</sup> Did Hezekiah king of Judah and all Judah put him to death? Did he not fear the LORD and entreat the favor of the LORD, and did not the LORD relent of the disaster that he had pronounced against them? But we are about to bring great disaster upon ourselves.”

<sup>20</sup> There was another man who prophesied in the name of the LORD, Uriah the son of Shemaiah from Kiriath-jearim. He prophesied against this city and against this land in words like those of Jeremiah. <sup>21</sup> And when King Jehoiakim, with all his warriors and all the officials, heard his words, the king sought to put him to death. But when Uriah heard of it, he was afraid and fled and escaped to Egypt. <sup>22</sup> Then King Jehoiakim sent to Egypt certain men, Elnathan the son of Achbor and others with him, <sup>23</sup> and they took Uriah from Egypt and brought him to King Jehoiakim, who struck him down with the sword and dumped his dead body into the burial place of the common people.

<sup>24</sup> But the hand of Ahikam the son of Shaphan was with Jeremiah so that he was not given over to the people to be put to death.

Again, I thought an extension of the reading helpful. This passage in Jeremiah is set in the early days of Jehoiakim. The oracles and stories of Jeremiah are strangely arranged, at least we find it difficult to make heads or tails of why this and then that is said in the book. This takes place relatively early in Jeremiah’s career. Why is it here in chapter 26? We don’t really know. We do know that this was a very tumultuous time.

The old king, Josiah, who was not that old, but had been king since he was a child, had died. He was a faithful king who had sought to undo the great and evil reign of his father, Manasseh. Manasseh’s 55 year reign has been bloody and idolatrous. Josiah restored the temple, took out the idols, and tore down the high places of Baal. But political things happen. A new power was rising in the north, Babylon and the Egyptians were determined to stop it. They sent an army north but in order to do so, they had to cross Judea. Josiah tried to stop them. Was he already a vassal of Babylon? Perhaps. Was he just trying to maintain the integrity of his own kingdom’s border? Perhaps. In any event, he met Pharaoh Neco’s army and died. The Egyptians claimed Jerusalem as their own and installed a son of Josiah on the throne as a puppet. But this did not last. The Egyptians lost that battle against the Babylonians and soon Babylonian soldiers and orders were heard in the streets of Jerusalem. The puppet was removed from the throne and another son of Josiah was installed – Jehoiakim, the king whose name we read today.

*Was he a schemer who saw an opportunity to seize power with the backing of the Babylonians? Probably, but we don't really know. What will become evident is that he was a foolish king who would eventually lead his people to rebel against the Babylonians and bring the wrath of Nebuchadnezzar upon them and the horrors of exile.*

*Today we see Jeremiah, who had been the advisor to Josiah and the architect of the religious reforms and revival of that time, come into the temple square and preach a sermon which the king and no one else wants to hear. If they do not repent, God will make this house like Shiloh. Shiloh was the old shrine at which Samuel had worked when he was a child centuries before. It is the place the tabernacle had been, now long tattered and destroyed by time. It was a dismal place which spoke of the long-lost glory of Israel. No one liked to think of Shiloh. Jeremiah says this place, Solomon's glorious temple, newly restored by Josiah, will be like Shiloh if you do not change your ways, amend your sinful life, and recommit to following God.*

*Like Pharaoh in the prior text, their hearts are hard. They will not listen. God's doom will come and exile will happen. Children will die, old people will die, a few will escape and from the remnant God will restore the people through a return and ultimately through Jesus. But that is a long ways off. Jeremiah calls them to repent, and they refuse. In fact, they elect to kill the messenger. I have included the rest of the chapter. Wiser heads prevail this time. They remember that another prophet had said something similar, Micah. Jeremiah is spared to speak again for decades. He will prophecy through the reign of wicked Jehoiakim, the brief reign of his pious son, the decade of Zedekiah's wicked rule, the days of Gedeliah the governor whom Nebuchadnezzar finally appoints and lastly he is dragged by the terrified people who remain in Israel to Egypt where he will apparently spend his last days lamenting all that happened. Did he bring the ark of the covenant there? Indiana Jones' first movie presumes that he did.*

*The preacher who considers this text might adapt the sermon from the reading above. Jeremiah's words of warning fall on deaf ears. God will have to take drastic measures. The kingdom of David, dear and beloved David, must die. This is not a time for half-hearted measures. God brings disaster. There is resistance – some will not hear this message. But that makes it no less true.*

Psalm 136:1-16

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,  
for his steadfast love endures forever.

<sup>2</sup> Give thanks to the God of gods,  
for his steadfast love endures forever.

<sup>3</sup> Give thanks to the Lord of lords,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;

<sup>4</sup> to him who alone does great wonders,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;

<sup>5</sup> to him who by understanding made the heavens,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;

<sup>6</sup> to him who spread out the earth above the waters,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;



<sup>7</sup> to him who made the great lights,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;  
<sup>8</sup> the sun to rule over the day,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;  
<sup>9</sup> the moon and stars to rule over the night,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;  
<sup>10</sup> to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;  
<sup>11</sup> and brought Israel out from among them,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;  
<sup>12</sup> with a strong hand and an outstretched arm,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;  
<sup>13</sup> to him who divided the Red Sea in two,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;  
<sup>14</sup> and made Israel pass through the midst of it,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;  
<sup>15</sup> but overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;  
<sup>16</sup> to him who led his people through the wilderness,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;

Or Psalm 4

Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness!

You have given me relief when I was in distress.

Be gracious to me and hear my prayer!

<sup>2</sup> O men, how long shall my honor be turned into shame?

How long will you love vain words and seek after lies? Selah

<sup>3</sup> But know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself;

the LORD hears when I call to him.

<sup>4</sup> Be angry, and do not sin;

ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent. Selah

<sup>5</sup> Offer right sacrifices,

and put your trust in the LORD.

<sup>6</sup> There are many who say, "Who will show us some good?

Lift up the light of your face upon us, O LORD!"

<sup>7</sup> You have put more joy in my heart

than they have when their grain and wine abound.

<sup>8</sup> In peace I will both lie down and sleep;  
for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.

Ephesians 5:1-9

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. <sup>2</sup> And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

<sup>3</sup> But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. <sup>4</sup> Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. <sup>5</sup> For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. <sup>6</sup> Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. <sup>7</sup> Therefore do not become partners with them; <sup>8</sup> for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light <sup>9</sup> (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), <sup>10</sup> and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. <sup>11</sup> Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. <sup>12</sup> For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. <sup>13</sup> But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, <sup>14</sup> for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

“Awake, O sleeper,  
and arise from the dead,  
and Christ will shine on you.”

*Again, I thought the text ended a little prematurely and the preacher would want to see where this goes. I find this sermon somewhat difficult to preach on its own, but in conjunction with the other texts it works very well. We are imitators of God. It is just too easy for our modern sensibilities to turn that into a works righteousness. I wish it were not so, but it is. Paul's long list of things to do and not to do is too quickly lost in the expected economy of buy and sell.*

*But when you join this with the other readings or with the earlier chapters of Ephesians, this becomes exceedingly beautiful and good news. For Paul speaks here of the great battle for our lives. God contends with the gods of Egypt and the demons on our behalf, utterly casting them down. From the dark dungeons of our former master, Christ has freed us from that bondage and Paul is exhorting us to live in that freedom, rather than enslaving ourselves anew.*

*We may imitate God as beloved children. I remember distinctly my then three year old son following me around the house with his play phone plastered to his ear. I sometimes wish my youngest son would imitate me in mowing the lawn. The imitation of which Paul speaks is born of Christ's great love for us. His life offered up on a cross was a fragrant love offering and sacrifice made to his father to liberate us.*

*That means that we are defined by his love and sacrifice – a purity which does not put self at the center, but which revolves around and takes its very being from him. With eyes fixed upon the author and*

*perfector of our faith, we no longer have time or interest in the crudities of the old and sinful slavery to which we were all once enslaved. Christ, the stronger man of the Gospel lesson has freed us from that. The appeal of these things is taken away.*

*Of course every human being recognizes now that Paul is speaking now of the new man whom Christ has raised from baptism's waters, not some begrudgingly reformed old man who is held in conformity with Christ's commands through force. That old man, who plagues us until we die, always loves the evil and hates the good. This is why you need to keep the OT and Gospel reading in mind as you read this. The person who reads and believes this text will either come to terrible spiritual pride or despair as this text either defines them or defies them. We need that image of God fighting this battle for us, leading us through wild places and navigating dangerous valleys.*

Luke 11:14-28

<sup>14</sup> Now he was casting out a demon that was mute. When the demon had gone out, the mute man spoke, and the people marveled. <sup>15</sup> But some of them said, "He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons," <sup>16</sup> while others, to test him, kept seeking from him a sign from heaven. <sup>17</sup> But he, knowing their thoughts, said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls. <sup>18</sup> And if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebul. <sup>19</sup> And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. <sup>20</sup> But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. <sup>21</sup> When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe; <sup>22</sup> but when one stronger than he attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his spoil. <sup>23</sup> Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

<sup>24</sup> "When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and finding none it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' <sup>25</sup> And when it comes, it finds the house swept and put in order. <sup>26</sup> Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there. And the last state of that person is worse than the first."

<sup>27</sup> As he said these things, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, "Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!" <sup>28</sup> But he said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"

**Luther** (*Pay close attention to the final paragraph of this Luther excerpt. He perceived of his world very differently than we do and his audience must have as well. I am betting the guy who deals in personal watercraft won't be enamored of this sermon.*)

1. This is a beautiful Gospel from which we learn many different things, and in which nearly everything is set forth as to what Christ, his kingdom and his Gospel are: what they accomplish and how they fare in the world. In the first place, like all the Gospels this one teaches us faith and love; for it presents Christ to us as a most loving Savior and Helper in every need and tells us that he who believes this is

saved. For we see here that Christ had nothing to do with the people who were healthy, but with a poor man who was greatly afflicted with many ills. He was blind, as Matthew says; also dumb and possessed with a demon, as Luke tells us here. Now all mutes are also deaf, so that in the Greek language deaf and dumb are one word. By this act Christ draws us to himself, leads us to look to him for every blessing, and to go to him in every time of need. He does this that we also, according to the nature of love, should do unto others as he does unto us. This is the universal and most precious doctrine of this Gospel and of all the Gospels throughout the church year. This poor man, however, did not come to Christ without the Word; for those who brought him to Christ must have heard his love preached and were moved thereby to trust in him. We learn therefore that faith comes through the Word; but more of this elsewhere.

2. Secondly, it is here demonstrated how Christ and his Gospel fare in the world, namely, that there are three kinds of hearers. Some marvel at him; these are pious and true Christians, who consider this deed so great that they are amazed at it. Some blaspheme the Gospel; these are the Pharisees and scribes, who were vexed because they could not do the like, and were worried lest the people should hold Christ in higher esteem than themselves. Some tempt him, like Herod desired a sign after his own heart, that they may make sport of it. But he answers both parties; at first, the blasphemers in this Gospel, and later on the tempters, saying that no sign shall be given this wicked generation except the sign of the prophet Jonah, of which we read in the verses following.

14. This dumb, deaf, blind, and demon-possessed man represents all the children of Adam, who through the flesh are possessed of Satan in original sin, so that they must be his slaves and according to his will. Hence they are also blind, that is, they do not see God. They are deaf, for they do not hear God's Word, and are not obedient or submissive to it. They are also dumb, for they do not give him one word of thanks or praise, nor do they preach and proclaim Christ and the grace of God. But they are all too talkative about the teachings of the devil and the opinions of men. In these things they see only too well and are wiser than the children of light in their undertakings, opinions, and desires. In these things they hear with both ears and readily adopt the suggestions of the flesh and blood. So then, whatever we do, in word and deed, as to both body and soul, is of the devil, whether it be externally good or bad, and must be redeemed through the work of God. We are in his kingdom and therefore we acknowledge him, see, hear, and follow him and praise and proclaim his name. All this takes place through the Spirit of God in his Word, which casts out the devil and his kingdom.

16. The tyrant in the court or palace is the devil, as I said before. He is in peace, however, as long as God's word and finger do not oppose him, and just like this deaf-mute, his people do whatever he wishes, for they know no better. His weapons and armor are the carnal conceit, doctrines, and traditions of men, by which he terrifies the conscience and protects himself.

17. But when the stronger man, the Gospel, comes, peace flees, and he rages like a madman, for he resents being condemned, unmasked, punished, and publicly branded. Then he gathers up his armor, the powerful, wise, rich, and holy people, and sets them all to attacking God's Word, as we see in the persecution of the teachers of the Gospel. Such rage and persecution signify that the devil retires very unwillingly and raves in his whole body; for as he acts in the body and its members when he must depart, so he also behaves in the whole world, resisting with all his power when he is to give place to the Gospel; but it is all in vain, he must be expelled.

18. For a stronger one, that is, Christ, comes and overpowers him and takes away his whole armor, that is, he converts some of those same persecutors, and to that extent makes him weaker, and his own kingdom stronger. He divides the spoils too, that is, those he converts he uses for various offices, graces, and works in Christendom, of which Paul writes in Rom. 12:16. He is also in the court yard or ante-room of the palace, for the devil's kingdom consists in outward appearances and pretenses of wisdom, holiness, and strength; but when it is captured by the Gospel it is found to consist of pure folly, sin, and weakness.

19. The text continues, "When the unclean spirit has gone out, he wanders through dry places, seeking rest," etc. This means as much as the saying, "The devil never takes a vacation" and "The devil never sleeps," for he is seeking how he may devour man. "Dry places" are not the hearts of the ungodly, for in such he rests and dwells like a mighty tyrant, as the Gospel here says; but there are dry and waste places here and there in the country where no people live, as forests and wildernesses. To these he flees in wicked rage because he is driven out. You will remember that the devil found Christ in the wilderness. Now, in Judea, there is no much water, hence we read that it contains many arid wastes. In other countries, however, as in our own which are well watered, the devils stay in rivers and lakes, and there they sometimes drown those who be or sail upon them. Furthermore, at some places there are water spirits, who entice the children from the shores into the water and drown them. These are the devils.

(*The Sermons of Martin Luther*, Vol. 2. Edited and Translated by John Nicholas Lenker. Re-published by Baker Publishing, 2000. pp. 156-165.)

One can also read a sermon of Luther on this passage in *The Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils*, Vol 1. Ed.: Eugene Klug. Published by Baker Publishing, 1996. Pp. 329-343.)

*Two weeks ago we heard the story of the temptation. Last Sunday it was the Canaanite woman whose daughter was possessed by an evil spirit. Today it is a mute man whose demon is cast out. One might sense a theme here, perhaps a theme to which our modern ears are altogether too deaf. I have told the story before and it bears repeating here. Many years ago now I was tasked with making a joint presentation with a Lutheran pastor from Ethiopia. He shocked me in our first meeting when he said that he was a true Lutheran and I was not because he read the Bible like Luther and I did not. He went on to say that when Luther read of a demon exorcised he was glad. He heard in that story that Jesus was stronger than the demons and he was pretty sure the guy down the street had a demon. He was afraid of that man and was glad that his Lord, his Jesus, who heard his prayers, was stronger than that demon.*

*The modern western Lutheran, he contended, might believe that demons are real. But he is not afraid of them. They are safely in the distant past. I might be afraid of cancer, of financial ruin, of climate change, but am I afraid of demons? Not likely. But read that final paragraph of Luther above. He was afraid of demons. Did he cross himself and say a prayer at every bridge?*

*Next Sunday we will read of Jesus feeding the multitudes. There is a problem we can get our hands around, hunger. We all get that, even if our refrigerators are full. But demons?*

*Blessed is the one who hears the Word of God and keeps it. We will take a stab at this below.*

*Before we turn to the sermon, however, we need to address a few matters in the text. The logic of the passage can seem odd. As Luther says above, the strong man is Satan and the stronger man is the Gospel and Jesus. Satan rules this world unchallenged until Christ comes along and displaces him, defeats him,*

*sends him packing. Christ then plunders his house for treasures. That treasure would be you and me. There is a powerful good news in that for us, but we may need to help people see that they are held in terrible bondage. Jesus has come and freed them. Our culture wants us to believe we are free, but is the removal of all the old rules really freedom? Is it not just enslavement to our libido, to our passions, lusts, and avarice? I am reading a text by David Brooks entitled The Road to Character. In it he highlights the stories of a number of men and women whom he holds up for various elements of character. One of them was A. Philip Randolph, the leader of the Civil Rights movement in the year before Martin Luther King Jr. took up that leadership. Randolph would be the chairman of the group which organized the famous march on Washington where King made his “I have a dream” speech. Randolph was infuriatingly polite. He almost never used a first name and was always deferential to everyone. His peers regularly chaffed and urged him to greater familiarity. But he refused. Politeness, he said, allowed him to talk to everyone – friend and foe alike. The rules of conversation were not something to be liberated from, but were necessary for the freedom to speak freely with everyone, including presidents, which he did on several occasions. The preacher who proclaims that Jesus has freed us, will want to explore the idea of freedom carefully. It may not mean what you think it means.*

**Sermon Idea** The Stronger Man (That the Holy Spirit would convict of the hearer of his/her fundamental weakness before the forces of evil which would devour him/her and trust in Christ to defeat our enemies and rescue us from all bondage.)

People in the first century saw a world which was full of spirits, demons, and sprites, most of them were malevolent and to be feared. If we go to ancient shrines we find countless votive offerings which were made in an attempt to have some control over life and the vagaries which these evil and capricious beings brought upon humankind. If you ever visit Rome and want to go to the Catacombs you will exit the city at the gate of Saint Sebastian. You are walking on a modern street but it is built on the ancient route called the Appian Way. There is a little chapel just where the ancient Appian way breaks off of the modern road. It is known as the “Quo Vadis” chapel. Legend has it that Peter was fleeing persecution in Rome when he met Jesus on this very spot, but Jesus was going the other way. Peter asked, “where are you going?” (Quo vadis?) and Jesus replied that he was going to Rome to be crucified again. Peter got the hint and turned around to face the persecution as the leader of God’s people, the post to which he had been called and in which he would himself be crucified.

What is not so well known is that the church is built on the site of an ancient shrine. Here pagan Romans, as they left Rome’s walls, would make a vow that if the gods would protect them and bring them safely home, they would make a gift.

The legend of Peter and Jesus is surely dubious and needs to be read with a measure of skepticism, but the truth it conveys is real. Christ has conquered all the things of which we are afraid, even crucifixion. We are not likely living in terror of demons down the street or in the water when we cross a bridge. Such things seem to us to belong to children’s stories about trolls that live under bridges and things that go bump in the night. But we have hardly banished fear, if anything, it has grown since modernity told us not to be afraid of ghosts and goblins. At least when it was a ghost and a goblin, you could point to a story like this and see Jesus casting out the demons. He was clearly their superior, their master. They could not stand up to him. But our fears today are both clearer and more nebulous. We fear the doctor uttering the C-word when the tests come back. We fear the financial down turn that will make our 401K worth that much less and hence force us to work that much longer. But we also are told to be afraid of climate change, economic uncertainty, shadowy forces, and environmental degradation and pollutants which may

make your broccoli toxic, but it might not and so you should keep eating your vegetables so you don't get the colon cancer your doctor warns you about. Our children are watched more carefully than ever, we buckle them into armor plated car seats until they are 12. You can buy health insurance for your dog so you won't have to spend \$12,000 on cataract surgery for Fido. This could go on.

The Christian hears the promise today that the one who contended with Satan in the wilderness and prevailed has come to storm Satan's castle, disarm him, and take his treasures. Those treasures would be you and me.

Satan's great power, the leverage he would apply to us in fear, death, and pain has been stripped away from him. It is not always easy to see. One can imagine Peter fleeing from that persecution. It would seem the logical thing to do until you notice Christ walking the other way. Death, suffering, and pain, have all lost their hold over us. We don't love them anymore than we used to, but we just are not afraid of them like we used to be. They cannot dislodge us from the mantel place in Jesus' living room where he displays his greatest treasures, us. He has paid dearly for those treasures. As Paul says, "Who shall condemn us? Christ Jesus who died and rose again is interceding for us at God's right hand." Nothing will separate us from God's love in Christ. The Devil has been disarmed, you see. He rages, screams, foams at the mouth at the thought of his loss, but the stronger man has you now. He is impotent to change that.