

"Jesus, the Conqueror of Satan"
Luke 11:14-28
Oculi, Lent 3
March 14 - 15, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Girard, Illinois

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It is the way of the wicked to call what is good evil and what is evil good. We see that in our society today, where, for instance, those who are working to overturn the Roe v. Wade abortion decision are called extremist, closed-minded, hateful; while those who support the right to kill unborn children are called mainstream, sensible, open-minded. We see this in the church where those who insist on doctrinal faithfulness to God's saving Word, are called unloving and legalistic and rigid and behind the times; while those on the other side are called inclusive and flexible and mature and loving. In this way the wicked portray themselves as good and noble and caring, while what is truly good and noble and compassionate is portrayed as something to avoid.

We see an example of something like that in today's Gospel. Jesus is doing something good. He is casting out a demon from a man who had been made unable to speak by it, freeing him from this dark power. When the demon had gone out of the man, he was able to talk again. The crowd that saw this marveled at the wonderful thing that Jesus had done.

But there were some there who hated Jesus, who out of envy couldn't stand or accept the goodness of Jesus. So they called good evil. They said, "He casts out demons by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons." In other words they were saying, "The only reason Jesus can cast out demons is because He gets His power from Satan." They tried to raise suspicions about Jesus in those who saw what He did.

By doing this, the ones who accused Jesus of being of the devil showed themselves to be of the devil. **For is it not the way of the devil to plant doubt and work against faith in Jesus?** And they further showed that they were in league with Satan by testing Jesus and asking for a sign from heaven; for isn't that exactly what the devil did in the wilderness when he asked Jesus to throw Himself down from the temple and let the angels catch

Him? Besides, they already had a sign from Jesus in the casting out of the demon. But unbelief always wants something more and different than Jesus and what He gives.

Later Jesus would say to this same crowd that it is an evil generation, which seeks a sign, and wants to walk by sight and not by faith. A people who trusts experiences and emotions more than Christ and His Word. Jesus said the only sign that would be given them is the sign of Jonah, the sign of a man submerged three days in the belly of death but who rose from the depths to new life. The sign which faith clings to, then, is the sign of the cross, Christ crucified and risen to save us sinners.

This sign of the cross has been given to you in your baptism, etched into your very bodies by water and the Word. At the font Jesus fulfilled the words of the service, **"Depart unclean spirit; make room for the Holy Spirit."** Like the mute, you are conceived and born with an evil spirit. You are by nature in the possession and the dominion of the devil. The Epistle reading said, **"You were once darkness . . ."** However, Jesus has shined into your darkness and washed away your sins and rescued you from the devil's domain, bringing you into His own realm of mercy and grace. So that, **"you are light in the Lord."** You have been released from the devil's grip. You have been brought into the kingdom of God's beloved Son; you are possessed by His Holy Spirit. Now your mute tongues are loosed to sing the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. Truly, Jesus has done good to you.

But just as was the case in the Gospel, there are people now who want to call that good evil. They label baptism and the liturgy of Christ's preaching and supper as being mere ceremony; they want signs and visual excitement, not divine service. Others attack God's Word by calling it a man-made creation. Or they berate Christians as being intellectually foolish and psychologically weak. But in the face of such demonic temptation, we remember that it is written, **"God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty."** In a world that wants signs from heaven, we know that Jesus Himself is our sign from heaven. He is all that we need. For again it is written, **"We preach Christ crucified, an offense to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God."**

Jesus is that Stronger Man who overcomes the strong man, the devil. But our Lord shows His strength not with spectacular power or with an all out display of force as we might

expect. In order to overcome the devil and rescue man, the Lord chooses to use Satan's own devices against him. Christ snares the devil with divine shrewdness and trickery and deception-but in a reverse sort of way: not evil disguised as good, but good disguised as evil. Jesus allows Himself to be hung on a cross, bloodied and beaten. He perishes as if he were an evil criminal. But in this way Jesus invades the enemy's domain of death and attacks from the inside out. From behind enemy lines He demolishes all of the devil's armor in which he trusted. Christ infiltrates the devil's kingdom and conquers him by means of the very death which the devil brought into the world. He turns the devil's weapons right back in his own face and destroys him. Man is released and set free.

It was by a tree that the devil overcame mankind, and so it is by the tree of the cross that the devil is overcome. It was by death that Satan sought to steal away man's glory; and so it is by the death of Christ that the glory of man is restored. Satan is caught in his own trap, bound and defeated. The strong man is out-strategized by the Stronger Man, Jesus. Our Lord after His death descends into hell-not to suffer, not to do battle, but to announce and proclaim his victory over sin and death and the devil. The war is over. Satan has been conquered. The devil's strongest weapon, death and all its terrors, is taken away. For we live in the sure hope of the resurrection of the body through Christ on the Last Day. Death is no longer the way Satan wins. For those who die in Jesus share in His everlasting life. That is the truth of Christ over and against the falsehood of those who call good evil. Satan is not divided against himself. But Christ has divided and conquered Satan's kingdom by the power of His holy cross.

Jesus makes it clear to the crowds and to us that there can be no sitting on the fence in this matter. Our Lord says, **"He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters."** There is no stance of neutrality when it comes to Christ, no middle-of-the-road, moderate position. Either you're with Him by faith, or you're against Him through unbelief. Either you take refuge in Him who is the Stronger Man, or you refuse Him and seek other shelter that draws you back into the devil's hands. There are no third options.

And yet many people live as if there were a third option, don't they? They're not really sure about God or the teachings of the Bible, but they might go to church anyway from time to time just in case, sort of like an insurance policy. They figure it would be better to go to church even if there is no God than not go to church if there is a God. That way they're covered-or so they think. **But I ask you, is that true faith or is that just hedging**

your bets? Is that someone who is with Christ or not? There are many people who try to live like that, somewhere in-between faith and unbelief. What they don't realize is that the in-between is unbelief. Such people are still set against Christ in their hearts and exposed to the power of Satan. For they live outside of the protection of Christ with nothing but their own wisdom and strength to shield them.

You see, even though the devil has been defeated and man's salvation has been won-fully and decisively-he still runs about making like he is strong, acting like he still controls death. He seeks to lure people away from the salvation of Christ, leading them into doubt and despair. And many fall for the trap, believing the strong man rather than trusting in the Stronger One. And so the evil spirits return to many a person from whom they were cast out. For the Holy Spirit given in baptism has been grieved and rejected. **"The last state of that man is worse than the first."**

It is not enough simply for evil to be cast out. The unclean spirit must be replaced with the Holy Spirit of Christ. Otherwise, one opens himself up to subtler and deeper sin, darker and more dangerous spirits. And so our Lord urges us here to remain steadfast in the faith. He says, **"Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it."** To keep the Word of God is simply to hold on to it, to cling to it, to treasure it and trust in its promises. Those who do so are blessed, for the Word of God is living and active and powerful to save. Ultimately, to keep the Word of God is to hold on to Christ. For He is the Word made flesh. Blessed are those who hear Jesus and cling to Him; for He is your refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Blessed are those in whom the Word of Christ dwells richly through holy absolution and preaching. Blessed are those who trust in Christ and who are filled with His true body and precious blood. Over such the devil has no power. He can't touch you. For you are in the Strongest One, the Lord over death and the devil. Let your eyes ever be toward Christ, who plucks your life out of death, who conquers your enemy, who is your sure defense.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.