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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 17 (Pentecost 13), Series A
Sunday, August 30th, 2020

Sermon: “Get behind Me, Satan!”¹
Text: Matthew 16:21-28

Focus: The cross of Christ defeated Satan and destroyed his power.

Function: That they would resist the devil and take refuge in the cross of Christ.

Structure: Story-Applied

Locus: “God’s will is done when He breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature, which do not want us to hallow God’s name or let His kingdom come...” (SC, 3rd Petition of the Lord’s Prayer).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. “Get behind me, Satan!” (Matt. 16:23, ESV).² That’s what Jesus says in our Gospel lesson. “Get behind me, Satan!” Go away! Leave me alone! Stop tempting me! If you thought that the devil had “ended every temptation” in the wilderness, you were wrong. No, the devil always waits for “an opportune time” to catch you off guard (Luke 4:13). What better chance to get Jesus off course than his first Passion Prediction, the first time he tells his disciples openly and plainly what he means to do in Jerusalem? “From then on Jesus began to show his disciples that it was necessary for him to go away to

¹ This sermon was originally preached on August 31st, 2014, at Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, CO.

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

Jerusalem, and to suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and to be put to death, and on the third day to be raised” (Matt. 16:21, CSM).³ It “was necessary” for Jesus “to be put to death”—to die on a cross!—“and on the third day to be raised.”

But that was too much for Peter to take! Messiahs are meant to conquer, not to be killed. In the popular Jewish piety of Jesus’ day, no one believed the Christ should end up on a cross. And so just a short time after boldly confessing Jesus to be “the Christ, the Son of the Living God” (Matt. 16:16), Peter takes Jesus aside and tries to knock some sense into him. “May God be merciful to you, Lord! This will most certainly never happen to you!” (v. 22, CSM).⁴ No way, Jesus! You’re not supposed to die! You’re supposed to drive out the Romans and bring back the kingdom to Israel! Messiah is supposed to sit on a throne. And the only way to do that is by *staying alive!* You’re the *Christ*—God’s beloved Son! There’s no way in the world that he would

³ All Scriptures marked CSM are from the preacher’s own, personal translation.

⁴ As pointed out by Gibbs and other commentators, the literal translation of the Greek for Peter’s rebuke is “[May God be] merciful to you, Lord! This will most certainly never happen to you!” The initial statement is sometimes used as an idiom in the Septuagint (LXX) for “God forbid!” And yet the literal translation is not preserved in most English versions, including ESV, NIV, and KJV. I believe a literal translation of Peter’s words helps to show that even pious words can nevertheless be diabolical when spoken in sinful ignorance or fear.

want you to die! Come on, Jesus! Wake up and get with the program!

“Far be it from you!”

“Get behind me, Satan! You are a trap for me, because you are not thinking about the things of God but rather the things of man” (v. 23, CSM). Peter’s rebuke is out of place. No disciple in their right mind would ever speak to their rabbi in such a way, let alone to one who is the Messiah! Peter needed a good smack in the head with a 2x4! But *Satan*? Jesus calls him *Satan*? How would *you* feel if somebody called you the devil?

Surely, Peter had the best of intentions even if he was misguided. And yet the road to hell is paved with good intentions. God’s plan of salvation—his divine rescue plan for sinners like you and me—required Jesus to die on the cross and rise again on the third day. “It was necessary,” Jesus said. But Peter tried to stop Jesus. He tried to change the plan and alter course. He tried to block the purposes of God. And no matter how good your intentions might be, as soon as you oppose the will of God, you become satanic.

And so, Jesus commands, “Get behind me, Satan!” It reminds me of Jesus’ final rebuke of the devil at the end of his temptation in the wilderness: “Be gone, Satan!” (in Greek, the verb is the same: *hypage*). Be gone! Get lost! Get out of here! Leave me alone!

So whom does Jesus really address here: Peter or the devil?

[Pause] Yes. [Laughter] Yes to both. Jesus is talking to Peter *and* to Satan. Because even though Peter doesn’t realize it, the devil is using him. When Peter speaks against Jesus’ plan to die and rise again, who is he speaking against? He’s speaking against *Jesus*. Peter is anti Christ when he argues with Jesus. He opposes God. No, I’m not saying that Peter is *the* Antichrist. But he becomes the devil’s agent when Satan speaks through him.

And so we make the startling discovery—and the point of my message today—that Satan is alive and well even in the church. The Peter who confessed Christ and whom Jesus would use to build his Church (Matt. 16:18-19) is also the same Peter who can be duped by the devil and seduced by Satan into doing and saying things that go against God’s will. Even though his words are couched in pious sentiments—

“May God be merciful to you, Lord!” (Matt. 16:22)— nevertheless, they are diabolical.

And so we are unfortunate fools if we let ourselves believe the devil is not active in the Christian Church on earth today, including our own congregation, Epiphany Lutheran Church. Some naïve Christians might like to believe that the Christian Church is off limits to the devil’s attacks. But that’s not the case! Don’t forget about the time Jesus was preaching in the synagogue, and a demon-possessed man ran in, disrupting the worship service and crying out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God” (Mark 1:24). But Jesus simply told the demon to be silent and come out, and out it came (Mark 1:25).

And so the devil has learned that outright attacks on the Church usually do not succeed. Bold, brash moves are more easily detected, and the people of God more readily respond to brazen attacks. Satan is a skilled tactician, an enemy not to be ignored, and he has learned that stealth and intrigue work better at wreaking havoc in the Church.

No, we must not pretend that the Church will be spared the devil's attacks. After all, the devil already has the world. Why does he need to bother with it? The world is already headed for hell. It is the Church he wants to destroy. As believers in Jesus and followers of Christ, we are hell's worst enemies. St. Peter warns, "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith..." (1 Pet. 5:8, NIV).

Nothing delights the devil more than problems in the Church and in the lives of individual believers. Divorce, drunkenness, drug addiction, bankruptcy, and other financial problems can rock your faith. And when you're down and desperate, you become too weak to resist other temptations. Scandal, conflict, and division are the devil's particular specialties, and he loves making a public spectacle of Christians' failures. Satan likes getting believers to gossip and grumble about other Christians. He gets especially excited when fear and suspicion rule our hearts and cause bitter fights in church meetings. And it doesn't even need to be dramatic. If Satan can even just get somebody distracted during the sermon or thinking nasty thoughts about another

Christian during the worship service, he's already accomplished his purposes.

And if he can get a *pastor* to fall, even better. The devil loves to lure and entice pastors with pride, greed, lust, loneliness, and despair. The devil has a heyday when pastors have affairs, get arrested for drunk driving or embezzlement, or resign the ministry because of burnout. When a pastor preaches and teaches false doctrine, it goes even better for the devil, because heresy breeds false belief and despair in its hearers. Every Christian has a target on his or her back, but pastors in particular are a tempting target. Pray at all times in the Spirit, but I beg you, pray also for me (Eph. 6:18-19). "Get behind me, Satan!"

And so we must all be on our guard against the devil and his designs. "Watch and pray," Jesus says, "that you may not enter into temptation..." (Mat. 26:41). "Put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand" (Eph. 6:13, NIV).

The Good News is that the Church does not stand alone or powerless against the devil. Jesus himself promised that "the gates of

hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). And the Bible assures us that “the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). The reason “it was necessary” for Jesus to die and rise again (Matt. 16:21) is because Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection were the undoing of the devil’s dominion. Even though Satan may have seemed to score a victory when Jesus died, he only managed to bruise his heel. Jesus is the Son of Man—Eve’s offspring, who crushes the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). The devil is a dragon undone, a chained monster who spews fire and foams at the mouth and thrashes about, trying to frighten and destroy Christians. But, as the Book of Revelation attests, the devil is a chained devil (Rev. 20:1-3).

The devil’s power is sin. Satan is a Hebrew title that means “accuser,” and when we sin, our consciences bear witness against us. The devil stands in constant accusation, trying to get God to punish us for our sins (Job 1-2; Zech. 3). But Jesus destroyed the power of sin when he died on the cross to forgive our sins and rose again to give us eternal life. Because of Jesus, the battle is won. Because of the cross,

Jesus has “redeemed [us]... from sin, death, and the power of the devil”
(SC, 2nd Article of the Apostles’ Creed).

As we sing in Luther’s hymn, “A Mighty Fortress”:

*Though devils all the world should fill,
All eager to devour us,
We tremble not, we fear no ill;
They shall not overpow’r us.
This world’s prince may still
Scowl fierce as he will,
He can harm us none.
He’s judged; the deed is done;
One little word can fell him.⁵*

One little word can fell the devil. One little word, but the most powerful word in the history of the world. And that one, little word is the name “Jesus.” The name Jesus must never be bandied about like a spell. But there is most certainly power in the name of Jesus.

Growing up in Pentecostal churches, I always heard that when you face the demons, just tell them, “In the name of *Jesus* I command you to depart!” and they will go—just like that. [*Snap.*] And it’s true! When the 72 returned to report to Jesus the results of their mission, they

⁵ Martin Luther, “A Mighty Fortress,” tr. composite, in *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), #656:3.

marveled, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!”

(Luke 10:17). Indeed, they are! “One little word can fell him.”

When believers speak and believe the name of Jesus, Satan falls like lightning (Luke 10:18). His star is falling, and he’s done for. He’s doomed. “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (Jas. 4:7). That is why Jesus says, “Be gone, Satan!” and “Get behind me, Satan!” (Matt. 4:10; 16:23). Resist the devil! Cast him out in Jesus’ name! Mock him! Hold the cross of Christ before his eyes and defy him!

“Nevertheless,” Jesus tells us, “do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20). Alleluia! Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.