



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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I Saw Satan Fall

Luke 10:17-24

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September 28, 2014 – Trinity 15

It may be the middle of Trinitytide, but I've been thinking about Easter all week. We're going to be looking this morning at Luke 10:17-24 and as I started looking at this passage last week, verses 18 and 19 in particular caught my attention and they got me thinking about Easter and about the Resurrection. Look at what Jesus says in those two verses:

And he said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you."

Serpents and scorpions are Old Testament images of sin and evil. It was a serpent who tempted Eve and through whom humanity became enslaved to sin. Even today, knowing the story of Adam and Eve or not, most people find something not a little sinister about snakes and most of us wouldn't get near a scorpion. Both are potentially vicious, venomous creatures that can kill. And I'm pretty sure that when Jesus spoke these words he was thinking of God's promise to Adam and Eve that one day her seed would crush the head of the serpent. And now we see Jesus' followers being sent out to do the work of his kingdom and as they do that work Jesus has a prophetic vision of Satan falling like lightning and he can't help but describe their triumph over his demons with that image of trampling serpents and scorpions. Because of Jesus' faithfulness,

God's promise is being fulfilled, evil is being beaten back, and the kingdom is being made manifest—and it's not just Jesus doing it. In his faithfulness Jesus started something, but his people continue the work empowered by him and going out with his authority. Jesus has inaugurated God's kingdom, but as he regenerates and renews his people, he calls them—he calls *us*—to work alongside him—and, he says, nothing can stop us.

That's what got me thinking about Easter this week. Reading Tom Wright's wonderful book "Surprised by Hope" a few days later added fuel to the fire. I almost didn't read it. This is one of his light-weight, popular-level books and after spending last year reading his heavy-weight books I thought it might be redundant. It wasn't. In fact, I highly recommend it. It's a book about the Resurrection and not just the Resurrection of Jesus, but the resurrection of the saints and of all Creation as our great source of hope. It's a rebuke and an exhortation. It's a rebuke to the Church for forgetting our hope of the resurrection, but it's also an exhortation to remember that hope and to go out into the world, fully of joy in the Holy Spirit to manifest Jesus' kingdom.

The other thing that got me thinking is the new "Left Behind" movie being released this week. "Left Behind" is a fictional story, but it's a story meant to teach a system of theology that undermines the very meaning and the very core of the Resurrection we confess in the Creed every Sunday. The resurrection we confess in the Creed, the hope we celebrate every Easter, and the joy Jesus expresses in our lesson from Luke this morning all point to a hope in renewal. Going back to our study of Genesis—back to the very first chapter of the Bible—we see God's creation of the cosmos as an act of

temple building. He not only built a house for himself, but he created humanity to care for that temple and to worship him in it. We rebelled and ever since we've been rampaging through his temple as we try to take control for ourselves. In his death and resurrection, Jesus freed us from our bondage to that rebellion—our bondage to sin. This is the great exodus he's been talking to his disciples about in Luke. And yet his exodus isn't meant simply to free us from sin so that we can escape from this broken and sinful world and live in some kind of disembodied spiritual existence in heaven as God rains down judgement. Not at all. Remember, God created this world as his temple. His desire—his plan—is to restore it and that restoration begins with us. He forgives us, he washes us clean us, he regenerates our hearts and renews our minds, and he fills us with his Spirit and he does all this as a foretaste of our future resurrection. On that last great day you and I—if we are in Christ—will experience in our bodies the Resurrection that Jesus experienced on Easter. So will Creation itself. But in the meantime, as we look forward to that great day he calls us to do the work of the kingdom. As he has manifested his kingdom in us, he calls us to manifest his kingdom in the world, not just in evangelism, but sharing the whole of the good news: preaching good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind—in working for and manifesting peace and justice to give the world a foretaste of the renewal—or *resurrection*—that the Creation, God's temple, will experience at the same time we do.

That's a very different sort of hope and a very different sort of mission than the "Left Behind" theology fosters. This pop-theology—which is less than 200 years old and has no connection with the theology of the

postles, the fathers, or the reformers—fosters a mentality of escape. Another big movie earlier this year, “Heaven is for Real” fosters much the same sort of thing in its theology. Yes, heaven is real, but it’s not what the movie tells you it is. This sort of theology encourages a retreat from the world. Sure, we’ll evangelise, but then all of us saved people will retreat and wait for God to rapture us all away to a strictly spiritual existence in heaven. The world is bad and to be freed from it is good and we’ll all watch from heaven as God judges the wicked and rains down fire and brimstone. Friends, that’s not biblical theology; that’s pagan Greek philosophy. Creation is *good*. Our bodies are good. It all simply needs to be renewed and purged of sin and death and *that* is our hope. Heaven isn’t our hope; it’s just the place where the saints wait with Jesus for the day when our *real* hope is manifest in the Resurrection and when heaven—God’s kingdom—breaks through into this world and the temple is finally set to rights once and for all.

In the meantime our calling and our mission are to go out into that world bearing the power and authority of Jesus to manifest his kingdom and to give everyone a foretaste of our great hope. To show the world what renewal and regeneration and resurrection look like and to *prepare* the world for their coming. Brothers and sisters, fulfilling that mission should be a source of joy. It was for Jesus’ disciples. Look at 10:17.

The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!”

Remember that Jesus was beginning his journey to Jerusalem. He knew that when he got there he was going

to be arrested by the priests and elders and he would be executed. On the way there he would take a meandering route through the country to visit as many towns and villages as he could, but wherever he went, this was their last chance to receive his message.

You’ll remember from last week that Jesus warned that it was better for Sodom, on which God rained down fire and brimstone, than it would be for towns like Capernaum, which refused him. Jesus knew that judgement was coming. What he has in mind was the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70 and the scattering of the Jewish people. Just as his own resurrection would be the model for the great resurrection of the saints at the end of history, the brutal destruction of Judea was for Jesus a model or a foretaste of the great judgement and destruction that those who refuse him can expect at the end of history. Jesus sent out his friends—seventy-two of them—to prepare the way because he knew it was urgent that the people hear his message. They went out like labourers into the harvest—time was short, judgement was coming soon.

And now the seventy-two come back to him—or at least some of them—and they’re *excited* about what they’ve seen. They went up against demons and amazing things happened. Remember, this was the world before the cross. Evil was unrestrained. These were people who were used to demonic activity and it scared them. And yet they had gone out and they’d gone toe-to-toe with the demons and the demons ran in fear. We can read into their words, no doubt, that sickness and sin ran in fear along with those demons. They did everything that Jesus had been doing. In their faith they manifested the kingdom—a

kingdom in which sin and death and demons are conquered by Jesus. And maybe this is why they address Jesus as “Lord”. Having seen his authority, they knew who he was. Remember that “Lord” was how the Jews of Jesus’ day addressed or talked about God. He had given his name to his people through Moses, but over the centuries they’d become afraid of speaking it out loud. Instead, they just called him “Lord”. And now these disciples are addressing Jesus as “Lord”. They don’t have any creeds and no church councils have met to hammer out the doctrines of the Trinity or the Incarnation, but they know that somehow God—the “Lord”—is present and working in and through Jesus.

The seventy-two are excited and Jesus is excited too. And he exhorts them, telling them about this prophetic vision he’s had.

And he said to them, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you.”

When Jesus had talked about judgement coming on Capernaum he used language taken from Isaiah 14. He does the same thing here, using Isaiah’s language to describe Satan’s fall from power. We might miss the significance of this, but it was a reminder to the disciples of who the *real* enemy was. Jesus doesn’t say that he saw Caesar fall like lightning. He doesn’t say he saw Herod fall like lightning. He says he saw Satan fall like lightning. Satan is the enemy. He’s the one that Jesus came to defeat and this is exactly what the disciples have seen. They didn’t come back in joy to tell Jesus that the Romans or the

Herodians ran in fear when they called on Jesus' authority. No, the *demons* ran in fear of Jesus.

And this is the first time Luke refers to the enemy as "Satan". Up to this point he's talked about the "devil". But now Jesus gets more specific. *Satan* is a Hebrew word. In fact, it's actually a title. For some reason we've come to treat it like a name in English, but in Hebrew it's *the Satan* and means "the accuser". The Scriptures don't tell us much about the Accuser, but what we can gather, mostly from Job and Zechariah, is that he was something like God's prosecuting attorney. His duty was to bring the charges against sinners in the heavenly court, but at some point he overstepped his role. Not only did he start trumping up charges, but eventually—as we see in the story of Adam and Eve—he started enticing or inciting people to sin so that he could accuse them. He brought sin into the world and then at every turn he did his worst to disrupt God's plan for redemption. God entrusted Israel with his promises of salvation, but Satan corrupted and perverted Israel and caused her to fail in her task. Now Jesus has come. He's taken up Israel's failed mission and Satan has tried to corrupt and pervert him too. Remember Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Three times Satan tried to derail Jesus from his mission, but each time Jesus rebuked him and in the end he fled. Jesus' final victory is still in the future at this point—still at the cross—but even still, Satan and his minions know his power and fear him. To defeat Satan was the Messiah's mission. I think Bp. Wright puts it very well:

"Jesus' task is therefore not simply to teach people a new way of life; not simply to offer a new depth of spirituality; not simply to enable them to go to heaven after death.

Jesus' task is to defeat the satan, to break his power, to win the decisive victory which will open the way to God's new creation in which evil, and even death, will be banished."¹

And the task—the mission—of Jesus' disciples is to manifest this defeat by doing battle with the enemy and winning. Battle is scary, but Jesus exhorts them a third time in verse 20:

Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

They came back full of joy that the demons were subject to them, but Jesus tells them that there's an even greater reason for joy: their names—*our* names—are written in heaven. This is an old Jewish idea of a heavenly census or register of the people who are personally known to the Lord. Our joy doesn't come from the authority we have over evil; our joy comes in knowing the source of that authority—in knowing that we belong to Jesus. Satan was cast down, but those who identify with the Lord Jesus are secure in his kingdom. Even were you or I to fall today in battle, our names are written in heaven and we will rise again with our Lord on the last day.

All of this prompts Jesus to burst out in joy to see the Holy Spirit at work and in his joy he prays. Look at verses 21-22:

In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for

such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

At the beginning of Luke's Gospel we heard Mary sing out in her *Magnificat*:

**He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.** (Luke 1:51-53)

That's what Jesus celebrates here in his prayer. God's kingdom is bursting into the world and as it does so it's bypassing the rich and the powerful, it's bypassing both the palace and the temple, and it's going straight to the humble and the hungry. It's going to the poor, to the sick, to the demon possessed, to the sinful, to the outsider—to the least, not to the greatest. The disciples probably thought immediately of Jesus taking the little child to himself and telling them that to be great in his kingdom meant being a servant to the least.

Why is God working this way? Because it's the humble who are ready to hear and because it's only those who know that they're sick who will seek a doctor. The rich and the righteous and the powerful have no reason to look for or to hope in the Creation being set to rights. As Jesus says elsewhere, they have their reward. They've invested

¹ *Luke for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2004), p. 124.

themselves in the status quo of the enemy. And for that reason the upside-down kingdom is foolishness to them. It's nonsense to those who think they're wise, but the little children understand. And this is why Jesus embraces the children—the literal children and the poor, the sick, the unclean, and the outsider. This was God's gracious will and it's by his grace that anyone understands. Five times here Jesus names the Father and three times he refers to his sonship. The Father is at work, he reveals himself to his Son, and it's the Son who reveals his work here on earth. It's that idea again that we saw before: "The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me." (Luke 10:16).

And that leads into verses 23 and 24:

Then turning to the disciples he said privately, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it."

Blessed are the eyes that see—blessed are we to whom Jesus has chosen to reveal the Father's plan and the Father's wisdom. We don't know all of this because we're so smart. We don't know all this because we're so deserving. The great prophets and kings of the Old Testament were certainly more deserving than we are. Abraham and Moses, David and Solomon, Elijah and Isaiah longed to see the kingdom that Jesus has now manifested for us—and which we have the great privilege of manifesting to others on his behalf. But, no, it's by the grace of God that our eyes have been opened to see the Son and our ears opened to hear his good news.

Brothers and sisters, in us—you and me—Jesus has created a new people for himself. We're a people who recognise the Son and through him the Father. We're people through whom God is establishing his kingdom—we're his royal ambassadors—and consider that in hearing and seeing what the great kings and prophets longed for and missed, we are the new Israel. Satan derailed Israel from her mission, but Jesus has taken it up himself, Jesus has defeated Satan in his death and resurrection, and in our Baptism we are now joined with him in that new life. In our lives he empowers us and calls us to live out his defeat of Satan and of sin and death, he calls us to live in hope of the resurrection he has promised, and he calls us to make that hope manifest here and now that the world might see and know his kingdom.

Our hope is not for escape from this world. Our hope is the remaking of this world. Our hope is in Creation cleansed and restored and in which a cleansed and restored—a *resurrected*—people serve our Lord and care for his creation. Jesus inaugurated this kingdom when he came. He defeated the enemy at the cross. He was the first to experience resurrection on Easter. And now he calls us not to retreat into the Church to wait for rapture or to wait for heaven. The very opposite, brothers and sisters. Here in the Church, here today, he enlivens us with his Word and he equips us by feeding us his very self at his Table, and he sends us out into the world to trample serpents and scorpions: to manifest his kingdom by preaching the good news that he is Lord and working in practical ways for the justice and peace of God's kingdom.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, thank you for revealing the secrets of your

kingdom to us through your Son. Thank you that through Jesus our names are recorded in your kingdom. Remind us now to find joy in living out our heavenly citizenship in this world as we share our hope of new life with the people and with the world around us. We ask this through Jesus our Lord. Amen.