



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Hear the Word of God and Keep It

St. Luke 11:14-28

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One of the things that Lent reminds us is that there's a battle going on. It's often easy to forget—except for those times when some horrible event committed by a downright evil person makes the news scene. It's often easy to forget that we ourselves wage a battle every day with sin because we become complacent. Lent is that season in the Church's year that reminds us there's a real battle going on. It begins with the story of Jesus' confrontation with the devil in the wilderness and then it reminds us again, Sunday after Sunday, until we get to Good Friday, where evil rises up to its greatest height and does its worst as Jesus is crucified. And then comes Easter and the empty tomb and we're reminded that Jesus has won the decisive battle. It shouldn't be a surprise, though. Right at the beginning of Lent it was there in the story. Three times Jesus said, "No" to the devil and instead trusted in the goodness and wisdom of God's plan. And the devil fled.

Lent reminds us of the battle. And Lent reminds us who the real enemy is, too, and where the battle is at. And we need the reminder, not just that there is a battle, but where it is. Sometimes we get caught up in the thinking of the world around us, in politics or some other agenda, and we forget. We see this in today's Gospel. You see, the Jews were expecting the Messiah to come and fight a battle with the Roman soldiers who occupied Judea. Some thought the Messiah would come

and start a fight with the Sadducees. They were the reigning aristocrats who controlled Jerusalem and the temple, but who had sold out to the Romans. And, while Jesus sometimes rebuked these people, he didn't seem to be going to battle against them. Worse, for some of the people who were watching Jesus, it seemed like he *could* call on the powers of God to rain down on the enemies of the Jews—he says at one point later on that he could call legions of angels to help him if he wanted to—but that's not what Jesus was doing.

Jesus consistently refused to do that sort of thing. Even when his disciples came to his aid the night he was arrested—remember Peter drawing his sword and charging into the high priest's soldiers—Jesus told him to stop. He even reattached an ear that Peter had cut off, healing one of the very men who had come to arrest him. And what becomes clear, especially at that point, is that the real battle Jesus came to fight is a battle against the very things that give rise to violence, to do battle against just the sort of wickedness that gives rise to violent men like Caesar who conquer others by force. Jesus told Peter, "If you take up the sword, you will die by the sword." If you fight fire with fire, fire still wins and everything burns up. Someone has to stop the cycle and deal with the root problem. Violence begets violence. Sin begets sin. Jesus came to fight a battle that would strike at the root and that would put an end to it all. But most of the people around him couldn't—or wouldn't—grasp this.

As St. Paul would write later to the Ephesians, the real battle is not against flesh and blood—not against the Romans or the Sadducees—or the Liberals or the Conservatives or the NDP—or Islamic State or Al Qaeda or the Taliban. That's what the Jews thought and, in fact, when

the Romans did squash the Jewish rebellion that took place between 66 and 70, the Romans killed a *lot* of Jews, but Jews themselves killed even more in their own in-fighting. The *real* enemy is the power of darkness itself. As we've seen in Romans, Paul sometimes talk about "sin" personified as a power. In the Gospels—following the Old Testament—the power of darkness goes by the name "the satan", which is a Hebrew title that means "the accuser". And here the people talk about "Beelzebub"—which means "Lord of flies" or "Lord of filth", going back to one of the false Canaanite gods—a personification of darkness, of evil, of sin itself.

One of the tactics of this enemy is to throw out accusations, sometimes rooted in but twisting the facts and sometimes just plain absurd. And that's what happens here. Jesus wasn't fighting the battle or the enemy the people thought the Messiah should be fighting and so some of them accused him: "You can only cast out devils because you're in league with the lord of the devils." The irony of it is that they only would have made this accusation if he really were casting out devils. People don't look at your miracles and accuse you of being in league with the devil unless you're actually doing miraculous things. If Jesus had been nothing more than talk, no one would have tried to explain away his miracles. Jesus *really* was up to something amazing—it just wasn't what the people expected or wanted.

And so he responds to them: "A divided kingdom fails. A house divided falls. If, as you say, I'm in league with the satan and battling his own forces, how can his kingdom stand?" His point is that it just doesn't make sense. The devil doesn't shoot his own forces in the back. And Jesus asks, "If I'm casting out demons because I'm in

league with the devil, does that mean your own exorcists are in league with him too?" Everyone knew they weren't. Their accusation just doesn't make any sense. And so Jesus then says, "No. I cast out demons by God's finger—by God's authority—and that means that God's kingdom has come to you."

Jesus goes on to give an illustration about a strong man, armed to the teeth, guarding his house. Everything he owns is safe and secure. But, if someone else comes along who's even stronger and overpowers him, he'll claim the strong man's house and possessions for himself.

His point is that he's done just this. God's sovereign power is at work through Jesus and he was won the right to act, because he's broken into the strong man's house and tied him up. Jesus is almost certainly referring to his victory over the devil in the wilderness at the start of his ministry when the devil fled. The devil knew just how important Jesus was—he knew just who Jesus was, unlike these people falsely accusing him here—and he tried to subvert his mission and ministry right at the beginning. But he failed and Jesus has since gone on to defeat the powers of sin and darkness at every turn because their lord has fled. (He'll come back again at the end to make one last final effort at the cross, but will be decisively defeated when Jesus is raised from the dead.)

Jesus knew he'd won the first battle. He was also confident, knowing ever since his baptism, that he was fulfilling God's plan and was filled with God's own Spirit to enable him to do the things he had to do. That's why things were different this time. He tells this odd story about an evil spirit who is cast out of a man and then returns to the man, but this time

bringing all of his evil spirit friends with him so that the man ends up worse off than before. What Jesus is pointing to is the real battle. Israel was like the demon-possessed man. Various reform movement had swept through Israel and put things in order, but what was really needed was the living Spirit of God. Until God's Spirit came to dwell in the hearts of his people, nothing was really going to change—not permanently and not in a way that really mattered. Jesus was there amongst them, doing the work of God, empowered by the Spirit. But they were so focused on the wrong enemies and the wrong battles and the wrong spiritual and political agendas that many of them were accusing him of being in league with the devil!

That's the point at which, in St. Matthew's version of the story, Jesus warns the people: "Say what you want about the son of man, but blaspheme the Holy Spirit and there will be no forgiveness, not in this age or the age to come." People often talk about this as "the unforgiveable sin". Lots of people worry that they've committed it and will never find forgiveness. Let me say, Brothers and Sisters, that if you worried about it, you probably haven't committed it. Here's what Jesus is getting at: If you see the redeeming work of God's Spirit—as the people were seeing it at work in Jesus—and you dismiss it as the work of the devil, you can never be part of God's redeemed people. It's like being thirsty in the desert and finding a spring of water. Drink and you will live; refuse to drink and you will die. It's that simple. But what if you're convinced for some reason that the spring of water has been poisoned? If you're convinced that the water is poison, you'll never drink it and you will die. Just so with Jesus and the Spirit. Judgement

was coming to Israel and Jesus had brought the way out and the only way out, but a person convinced he was in league with the devil would never repent and follow Jesus. The same goes for us. Judgement is coming. Jesus offers the only way out. But if you see him at work and attribute what he's said and done to the devil, you're building a wall between yourself and your only hope and you will die.

Luke ends the story on an important note that we might miss if we're not careful. A woman who hears Jesus is amazed by his words and cries out a blessing: "Fancy being the mother of such a wonderful boy!" But Jesus turns her blessing around: "Blessed are those who hear God's word and keep it." In other words, blessed are those who are careful to watch and are willing to follow the work that God is doing and who don't stumble over their own agendas and pre-conceived ideas. As John announced to prepare the way for Jesus, "Repent, for the King and his kingdom are at hand." Think on that as you make your way through Lent.

Let's pray: ALMIGHTY God, consider the heartfelt desires of your servants, we pray, and stretch out the right hand of your majesty to defend us against all our enemies, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*