



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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The Third Sunday in Lent: The Finger of God St. Luke 11:14-28 Fr. William Klock

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Imagine being one of Pharaoh's court magicians when Moses came with that message from the Lord, the God of Israel, demanding, "Let my people go!" Pharaoh laughed. This Lord, this God of Israel was no match for him or for his gods. Powerful gods did not let their people become slaves. And everyone knew that the gods of Egypt were the greatest and most powerful in the world. This Lord, this *Yahweh*, this god of a poor and subjugated people, this god hiding, unknown in the desert for hundred of years, who was he to be sending a prophet to mighty Pharaoh making demands? Pharaoh laughed. And the whole court, including the magicians laughed with him. Stupid Moses. He could have had everything. He was born of the Hebrews, but chosen by a daughter of Pharaoh and raised in the royal courts. The gods of Egypt had shown him great favour. But what a fool. He gave it all up. Hiding in the desert like an outlaw, he'd met the pathetic god of his own people and chosen him over the gods who had shown him such favour, over the most powerful gods on earth. And then to come to Pharaoh, making demands and promising disasters and calamities. They laughed at him. Oh, look! He could turn his brother's staff into a snake. Neat trick. But so could they. Pharaoh had sent Moses packing. And then that first plague. The Nile turned to blood as Moses had promised. They hadn't expected that. But they could do it to. Of course the real trick was turning it back into water. Maybe they could, maybe they couldn't. But thankfully Pharaoh hadn't asked them to do that. And

then the frogs. Everywhere. In the streets and in their houses, in their beds, in their ovens, in their toilets. This God of Israel had power, but it was nothing they couldn't do themselves and do it they did. Pharaoh nodded smugly at them as they caused frogs to come up from the Nile just as Moses had. They nodded back, they smiled, but they had to admit they were feeling a bit nervous about all this.

And then the third plague. Aaron struck the dust of the earth with his staff and it turned into gnats and gnats and more gnats and they covered everything. And Pharaoh looked to his magicians, and nervously they struck the ground with their staves. And nothing happened. They knew. He knew. Whatever Pharaoh might claim about being lord of the earth, his power and the power of his magicians and his gods was limited. The Nile was the source of Egypt's life and over the Nile the gods of Egypt had power. But no more than that. Ever since Moses had turned the river to blood, the magicians—and surely Pharaoh—had been troubled. This was their territory. This was the domain of their gods. That puny god of the Israelites whom Moses had met out in the desert, he should not have had power over the Nile. And while Pharaoh put on a show of defiance and self-assurance, the magicians worried. This God of Israel was more powerful than they thought.

Brothers and Sisters, I think we forget that the world was a very different place before Jesus was raised from the dead on that first Easter morning, before the gospel went out like a shockwave across the world. Whatever they were, demons or something else, the gods of the pagans—or at least some of them—were real. Jesus and the gospel stripped them of their power. Everyone noticed it. The Greek philosopher Plutarch wrote a treatise, trying to explain why the gods of the Greeks suddenly went silent in the First Century—their oracles ceased to

speak anymore. Athanasius wrote about the same phenomenon in his treatise *On the Incarnation of the Word of God*—but, of course, he knew the answer. It was Jesus. The power of the devil to deceive the nations was broken—for good—and his kingdom was taken from him. The true light had come into the world and the darkness was driven away and the world has never been the same since.

Over a thousand years before, Pharaoh and his magicians got a foretaste of what was to come in Jesus. That day, as they struck the dust with their staves, over and over again in frustration, trying to call forth gnats as Moses had, but I think knowing all along that they had met their match, that day those Egyptian magicians were forced to acknowledge the greatness of the God of Israel. "This is the finger of god!" they said to Pharaoh. This is no trick. This is real and this god has more power than we do, then you do, than our gods have. They warned Pharaoh, but his heart was hard and it would take seven more plagues, each showing the power of the Lord over the earth—and most importantly over Pharaoh and his gods—before Pharaoh was finally broken. Even then, after letting the Hebrews go, he changed his mind and sent his army after them. In another display of his might, the Lord parted the sea to deliver his people and then to drown Pharaoh's army. But rather than acknowledge the Lord and give him glory, the proud Egyptians simply wrote those events out of their history. The gods of Egypt survived. They survived conquest by the Greeks and they survived conquest by the Romans. But then Jesus rose from the grave and robbed their master of his power and his kingdom, bound him and cast him into the pit, and finally the gospel—tradition says it went to Egypt with St. Mark in the lead—the gospel marched into Egypt where no one worships Isis or Osiris anymore, but where Christians continue to gather each Sunday to praise Jesus and to give glory to the God of Israel. To

quote those ancient pagan magicians: “This is the finger of God!”

Now, think about our Gospel today and imagine being the descendant of those Hebrews who saw their God in all his glory defeat Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt. Imagine being the descendant of those people who passed through the waters of the Red Sea with unmoistened foot. Imagine being the descendant of the people who had met the Lord in the cloud and lightning on Mount Sinai and who had followed the Lord into the promised land as he defeated the gods of Canaan just as he had the gods of the Egyptians. Imagine being the descendant of *those* people, being raised on those stories, your identity integrally tied up in the narrative of the Exodus, in which you took part every year at Passover. Imagine then being unable—or obstinately unwilling—to recognise the God of Israel at work again over the powers of evil. It seems like it should have been unthinkable, but that’s exactly what we read in the Gospel today from Luke 11. Here’s what Luke writes in verses 14-16:

Now [Jesus] was casting out a demon that was mute. When the demon had gone out, the mute man spoke, and the people marveled. But some of them said, “He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons,” while others, to test him, kept seeking from him a sign from heaven.

Lots of people saw the God of their fathers, the God of the Passover and the Exodus, they saw him at work through Jesus and they gave him glory and believed. A lot of them believed even though so many things about Jesus didn’t make sense to them or didn’t meet the expectations that people had for the Messiah. What they *did* know was that in the Messiah, the Lord would visit his people and set the world to rights. In a world broken by sin, he would set things to rights—and that’s just what Jesus was doing.

They thought the Messiah would come in a chariot like King David. Some thought he would lead a violent revolution. Most people thought he would overthrow the Romans and set up his throne in Jerusalem to rule the nations. And Jesus, at least so far, hadn’t lived up to *that*. But he was causing the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the mute to speak. He was casting out devils. He was preaching good news to the poor. All the things the prophets had said the Messiah would do. And so they believed, despite their questions. But not everyone. Some were so dead-set on their preconceived ideas about the Messiah that they couldn’t believe the obvious. Luke says some of them demanded signs—as if what Jesus was doing wasn’t enough. And then there were others that would rather blaspheme the work of the Lord than admit they might be wrong about the Messiah. “He casts out demon by Beelzebul,” they said to dismiss him. In other words, “He’s in cahoots with them.” Beelzebul was a pagan Philistine god. So here’s Jesus, in the synagogue every Sabbath, performing signs just as the prophets had said and giving all the credit and glory to the Lord. But now he casts out demons and these folks accuse him of witchcraft.

Back in Chapter 12, Jesus referred to this kind of thing as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and his point was that it put a person in very dangerous territory. The Messiah was the Lord’s provision for the salvation of his people from the coming judgement. His *only* provision. So to attribute his power and works to devils, well that’s pretty much the ultimate statement of disbelief, the ultimate rejection. It’s not that people who made this foolish accusation couldn’t change their mind in the future and believe, but Jesus warns them, because such obstinate unbelief, such unbelief that insists on such stupid and outlandish explanations for what Jesus was doing, such *blasphemy*, has at its root a heart that has been hardened against the

Lord. A heart his people had seen before in Pharaoh. And we all know how that went for him. No matter what great thing the Lord did, Pharaoh’s heart was unmoved. When the day of the Lord came to Israel, those people—even though they thought they were the faithful ones, defending the Lord and his people from false messiahs—they would be swept up in judgement and wind up like the Egyptians had.

Brothers and Sisters, be cautious yourselves not to fall into similar traps. Last month the Internet was abuzz—to put it mildly—about events happening at a college in Indiana. Some people called it a revival and other people loudly denounced it as, at best, man-made and, at worst, demonic. It highlights the need for us to be more circumspect about those kinds of accusations. Jesus, himself, warned his disciples. They saw someone casting out demons in his name, but this guy didn’t have an apostolic franchise. They tried to stop him and Jesus warned them, “If he’s acting in my name and if he’s not against us, then he’s with us. Let him alone. He’s doing our work.” The Spirit works in the Church and in Christians, usually in ordinary ways, but every once in a while in extraordinary ways. And if the Spirit could only work through churches and Christians that are perfect, he’d never be able to work at all, because we’ve all got problems. No one’s doctrine is perfect. None of us is as holy as we ought to be. When God moves through his church, it will always be through imperfect people and imperfect movements. Even as his Spirit breathes new life into his people, they remain imperfect Christians in imperfect churches. If we see something happen and it’s promoting heresy or unholiness, if there’s false prophecy involved or if it directs people away from God’s word or from the Jesus we know through Scripture, we can know that that is *not* a move of God. *But* when a movement, however imperfect, points

people to Jesus and to the word, and causes people to pursue holiness and makes them better stewards of God's grace and of the gospel, Brothers and Sisters, give it the benefit of the doubt, praise God, and pray that it will bring reformation.

Back to Luke now. Knowing how silly this accusation of witchcraft is, Jesus responds. Look at Luke 11:17-23.

But he, knowing their thoughts, said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls. And if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebul. And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe; but when one stronger than he attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his spoil. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

They're so opposed to Jesus that they haven't thought through their accusations. Why would the satan be shooting his own forces in the back? In Jesus, the battle with evil was coming to its climax and the devil knew it. In fact, he was already losing. As Jesus says, like someone breaking into a strong man's house, tying him up, and stealing his stuff, Jesus had already broken into the devil's house and robbed him of his power. He was preparing to take back his kingdom and he was showing everyone by bossing around the satan's minions—and the satan was powerless to do anything about it.

And Jesus also says, "You've got exorcists amongst your own people.

You don't question accuse them of being in cahoots with the devil. Why would you would you accuse me?

Then Jesus makes a very deliberate point of recalling the Exodus and the magicians of Pharaoh with that statement, "But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." They knew the Old Testament and they knew their own story, so they couldn't have missed the allusion. So much of what Jesus was doing—and before him what John had done—pointed the people back to the events of the Exodus and Jesus (and John) did this to make the point that the Lord was on the verge of acting again to deliver his people. A new exodus was about to happen. And so this bit about the finger of God is a rebuke. Jesus is reminding them that even Pharaoh's magicians were able to recognise the God of Israel at work—and their knees quaked in fear to think of what was to come. If pagan magicians could recognise the Lord at work, shouldn't the Lord's own people be able to recognise him all the easier? What does it say about the state of Israel when the Messiah comes and is so obviously doing all the thing the prophets had said he would, but his own people reject him and even dismiss his power as demonic? That's what the next few verses are getting at. Look at 24-26:

"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.' And when it comes, it finds the house swept and put in order. 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."

This isn't a method or a theology of exorcism. It's Jesus commentary on the state of Israel and a rebuke of his people. For a thousand years they'd known reform movement after reform

movement. In the days of the judges, the people would stray from the Lord, he would allow someone to oppress them, and then they would repent and cry out to him and he would deliver them—over and over and over. Repeatedly kings had tried to reform the nation. And in more recent years they had known reforms and times of national repentance—the days of Ezra and the Maccabees. This is what the Pharisees were all about—another reform movement to get the Lord's people back to being faithful to *torah*. And all of those movements for reform were good, but none of them ever solved the real problem. Jesus compares Israel to a man with a demon. The demon is cast out, it goes wandering for a while, but finds nowhere to rest, so eventually it returns to the man. And while the demon's been gone, someone's cleaned house. So the demon goes and gets a bunch of its friends and they return to the man and now he's worse off than before. Just so with Israel. The prophets put it in terms of the need for a heart transplant. Israel needed her heart of stone replaced with a heart of flesh. She needed the law written on her heart by the Spirit, because the law written on stone tablets was never enough. She needed love for God inscribed on her heart. She needed to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit. And here, in light of the accusations being made against him, Jesus puts it in terms of demonic possession, but however it's made, the point is that Israel desperately needed a work of the Lord in her midst if anything were to truly change for good. And here's Jesus doing just that and they're chalking his power up to the devil. So this is a statement of grief over the state of his people, it's a call to repentance and faith, and it's warning against the judgement to come.

But then a woman speaks up from the crowd and highlights the discouraging fact that even the people who believe, even the people who see the Lord at work in Jesus and are excited about

it—even they don't really get it. Even they need a work of God done in them. Look at verses 27 and 28:

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!" But he said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"

She'd been rooting for Jesus from the beginning and that gotcha with the people who accused him of being in cahoots with Beelzebul, just wow! Jesus was amazing. He knew his Bible—that bit about comparing those guys to Pharaoh's magicians was genius—and he was smart and he was witty and he could do miracles. Maybe she had a son who had turned out to be kind of a disappointment. And so she cries out, "What a boy! Your mama is truly blessed to have you for a son!" And it was true. Gabriel had announced to Mary, "Blessed are you among women!" But that's not the point. The Egyptian magicians recognized the power of God at work in Moses, but they still stood with Pharaoh. This woman—and many others—went a step further. They saw God at work in Jesus and praised him for what they saw. But, Brothers and Sisters, it's not enough to see God at work and clap our hands and say, "Oh, isn't this great!" or "Isn't this wonderful and exciting!" or even "Praise the Lord!" Remember when people came to Jesus and said, "Your mother and your brothers are outside looking for you." And he took the occasion to make a vital point about the gospel. He said, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it." In other words, the Kingdom is not made up of those who merely praise the Messiah, but of those who give up everything to follow him in faith. The way to the kingdom is obedience—to drop everything, to set aside one's own agendas and false ideas of the Messiah and the kingdom, and to follow Jesus. Think on that as you

come to the Lord's Table this morning. Here we recall what the Lord has done for us—for the world—in Jesus. And here we not only recall, but we participate ourselves in that great exodus in which Jesus has led us out of our bondage to sin and death, through the water of baptism, and into the kingdom and into the Spirit. We have seen the finger of God at work through the Messiah. Now respond in faith, not just as an enthusiastic spectators, but by truly following Jesus in faith, in repentance as we set aside every distraction, every idol, and walk with him in obedience. Be a people immersed in his word. Be a people who stick close to our Lord in prayer. Be a holy people, be light in the darkness, and stand firm in faith amidst the storm, knowing that Jesus has already won the victory.

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; purify our disordered affections, so that we may behold your eternal glory and walk in obedience to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*