

“Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way...and he bowed down and fell on his face.” (Numbers 22.31)

Centuries of warfare have taught us what a defensive structure looks like. We grow up with the image of medieval castles, guarded by knights in shining armour. Tangibly, we can travel not too far away and see examples of fortresses and Martello towers within our own province and in Nova Scotia. Of course, Fredericton itself was the location of the small French Fort Nashwaak near what’s now the Picaroons roundhouse at the close of the 17th century. We’re taught that defenses involve armies and weapons and walls. They are the features of glorious Hollywood battles, and ever-present in real-world ongoing border disputes and wars of today.

In our lessons, we are also talking about defenses, although quite different than physical defenses. Today’s lessons concern Spiritual defences, and He who provides them – Almighty God – who is “our defence against all our enemies”, the collect says.

Today, the third Sunday in Lent, marks the halfway point in our Lenten journey, and it marks the third week in a row where our Gospel readings deal with acts of the devil and temptations. In today’s case, though, Jesus is the very one being accused as working *for* the devil! As he casts out the demon from a deaf and mute person, some of the onlookers thought that he must be demonic himself to command other demons. What an accusation!

In response, Jesus says that the power of Beelzebul pales in comparison to God’s power, which is the source of his power. He claims this power by using the phrase “the finger of God”. The finger of God. Not the hand of God, or the arm of God, or the fist of God. The finger. In Exodus, chapter 8, this is the phrase used by the magicians of Pharaoh’s court to describe the superior power that Moses had. They could not duplicate his miracles, so their only explanation was to tell Pharaoh, “this is the finger of God”. This was the LORD, the God of Israel’s power at work, and they could not match it. Jesus wields this same finger of God, and it is by this finger that *he* casts out demons, not by the power of Beelzebul.

For Jesus’ is the superior power. A strong man armed and guarding his palace keeps the peace just fine, but if a stronger, better-armed man comes by, the first man will lose everything to the stronger man. Jesus is the strongest defense there is. The power which he yields to cast out demons leaves such a strong defense, that even when the demons come back stronger, the guard is not caught sleeping.

This defensiveness, posting a guard against the devil, is what we have been told to do for these last three weeks. We started with the example of Jesus himself in the desert, resisting the three temptations of the devil. Last week, we read about other types of temptations we are faced with – namely grouping people into made-up categories and treating those groups poorly. This week, St. Paul lists off some of the temptations we can be faced with, while both he and Jesus tell us the best defense against these temptations is the Lord – the Holy Spirit.

St. Paul tells the Ephesians that they used to walk in the darkness of these temptations: sexual immorality, uncleanness, covetousness, idolatry, foolish-talking, and crude joking are all things he mentions. Don’t walk in the darkness of these sinful ways, he says, instead walk in the light of the Lord. Allow the light to make visible the shameful things that are done in secret and expose them. Expose them with the light so that they might not deceive you. Resist that temptation, allow the Lord to be your defense.

The truth is, we don’t often know just what we are doing or the consequences there might be. We are often blinded by our own sinful ways, so we might overlook the danger of a

particular situation. Take, for example, swimming. I could be the strongest swimmer there is, and because I know I am a strong swimmer, I don't err on the side of caution and find out all the information I need about a new stream or river. I didn't think to ask anyone about the currents, and suddenly I get caught up in a strong current that quickly pulls me under. Another example is simply telling a bad-natured joke and causing somebody hurt without realizing it.

When we repent of our misdeeds and ask the Spirit for guidance, we get a level of protection from demons – a protection we sometimes didn't know we needed. The light of the Lord will shine upon the unfruitful works of darkness and reveal their true nature to us.

We have an example this morning in our Old Testament reading from the Book of Numbers. Taken out of context, the story of Balaam's talking donkey sounds ridiculous. In context, however, we can learn that this is an example of God's trying to nudge people in the right direction, to guide them away from temptation. Balaam was told by God that if a certain condition was met, he should ride on, and if that condition was not met, he should stay put. Balaam had been urged by Balak to come to him and curse the people of Israel, but God came to him and said he should not curse them because they were a blessed people. Again, urged by Balak to come to his aid, Balaam pleaded for permission from God to go. God said "no", again, but Balaam went anyway. He saddled up his donkey and set off. God was angry and sent an armed angel to block the way: only the donkey could see it. Balaam got angry at the donkey and started to hurt it, until God opened its mouth so it could speak to Balaam, and then Balaam himself was allowed to see that an angel of the Lord was blocking the way, denying him further access to the road. Balaam was so surprised he fell down on his face and worshipped the Lord.

The Lord defended the children of Israel from Balaam's curse, as he had sworn to protect them. They likely didn't even know, at the time, that this happened. Jesus cast out devils and exhorted those in his presence to take on the Lord's protection themselves so that a band of stronger demons didn't take hold. When we take on the Lord's protection, do we realize it? Can we acknowledge it?

Today's Gospel acknowledges that some people, when a good thing happens, can't even recognize it as being a good thing. Rather than glorify God for the healing Jesus did, some onlookers accused him of being in cahoots with the enemy. How do we do the same thing? John Keble saw some ways, as he said, "This, to be sure, was the extreme of folly and spite; but be assured my brethren, that we go some way towards it, as often as we put cold, uncharitable interpretations on any seeming improvement in our neighbour's conduct. You shall hear people sometimes say scornfully, How good such a person is grown! Take you care of such words, such tones, lest perchance you be mocking and trifling with God's grace."¹

Let us, then, take care to pay attention for the work of God's Grace among us and acknowledge his protection and power. As we move deeper into the Lenten season, let us continue to flee from the assaults of the devil and cling to the light of our saviour, who marches on to his death on Calvary's tree. "*Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light.*" (Eph. 5.14)

Amen.

¹ John Keble, "Sermon XXII: Third Sunday in Lent" from *Sermons for the Christian Year: Sermons for Lent to Passiontide* (1876).