

**“Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.” (Ephesians 5.2)**

Though this weekend is the Third Sunday in Lent, it simultaneously feels like it’s already been a lot longer than that and it feels like we only just started. We are a mere month away from Holy Week and Easter, so the end *is* in sight. But even with the finish line in view, you might be feeling like there’s still a long way to go, and perhaps if you’ve taken up any Lenten Disciplines, you might be starting to find it hard to follow them. I would dare say that this phenomenon is not unique. We all long to do what we said we wouldn’t, or perhaps we’re tired about the things we decided to add. And our lessons today seem to acknowledge that feeling and encourage us on our way to the cross.

For three weeks now, we have been up close and personal with the nature of sin and temptation. We have been invited to venture into a wilderness, as Jesus was driven in by the Holy Spirit. In this wilderness, we are met by the temptation to make it all stop – to pull the plug and go back to the status quo. To give up on any new commitments we’ve made. Similarly, Jesus was met by the temptation to reveal his divinity to achieve his comfort – comfort to his hunger, the giving of power, and to prove he was God. But as we know, Jesus overcame that temptation and drove away his tempter.

Similarly, our Gospel lesson has Jesus casting out a demon which rendered a man mute. The crowd that witnessed this miracle murmured amongst themselves that Jesus must be working for the chief devil to be able to cast out devils, but he quickly tells them how silly that would be: “if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand?” (Luke 11.18). Instead, Jesus says *he* is casting out the unclean spirits through the power of *God*. He illustrates himself as being a stronger man who comes in to overpower the guard and ultimately tears down his defences and casts him out. Jesus certainly has the power and the strength from God to cast out demons.

But paired with this statement comes a warning: what do we do when an unclean spirit *has* been cast out and the house *has* been left empty? Jesus tells those listening to him that without the proper protection, that spirit will come back with seven of its even-stronger friends and then the person is worse off than they were at first.

This Lenten wilderness that we have entered into is not much different than the situation portrayed in this Gospel. We have been asked, through our tradition of adopting a Lenten discipline, to cast something out of our lives: something that gives us comfort, something that draws us to sin, or something that takes us away from the presence of God. In some cases, what needs to be cast away is being busy for busyness’ sake. We have been called to a wilderness to pause, reflect, and acknowledge how the things in our lives distract us from our love of God. In this wilderness, the wind of the Holy Spirit blows the sand at us, and we are slowly brushed by it. Our sharp edges start to become smooth, but it isn’t a walk in the park.

It’s hard work. This wilderness forces us to come to terms with the weaknesses we have and realize our need for God. We need God to cast out the demons and temptations in our hearts and allow space for the Holy Spirit to work in us. We need God to be our defence against seven even more powerful enemies coming to live within us. But just what do these seven enemies look like? How is it that we can slide back so easily into a place worse than where we first left off?

St. Paul, in his exhortation to the Ephesians on Godly living, makes it sound all too easy to slide back. The temptation to sin is always around us, but we must consciously choose to make the right choices, he says. He says that, in particular, the sins of sexual immorality, impurity, and covetousness “must not even be named among you” (Eph. 5.3) since these often lead to further sin. “Walk as children of light... and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them” (Eph. 5.8-11). It’s critical, says St. Paul, that the Christian be so aware of sin around us that we do not even associate with those sins for the sake of our own salvation. We must drive out the demons among us. With what, then, do we fill the void so that seven stronger don’t return? With thoughts of thanksgiving for what God has given us, Paul says. We are urged to replace the thoughts of sin with thoughts of God.

This is not always an easy path. Just like when we ‘give up’ something for Lent, the desire to go back to how we were before is ever-present. And, probably more often than not, *how* do we give in to

this desire? We convince ourselves that it will be fine. We bow to cheap grace: “God has already saved us, what is this *one thing* going to do?” And then a second, and then a third, and before we know it, we’ve given up the whole idea of a discipline because we’ve been convinced it doesn’t *really* matter. “Let no one deceive you with empty words,” says St. Paul.

When Jesus was brought to the pinnacle of the temple, he was tempted to throw himself down for, surely, he would be saved. Jesus was struggling in his wilderness and the temptation to end it all was at his fingertips. He could have easily done so, knowing that he *would* have been saved by the angels. But instead, he simply responds “thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.” So, too, should we not be tempted by the knowledge that Jesus *is* our defence, for that is not a free pass for us to invite the demons back in.

The truth is, we don’t often pay attention to 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. 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, and we will be afforded a protection stronger than we could imagine.

We have an example of this protection in our Old Testament reading from the Book of Numbers. Taken out of context, the story of Baalam’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 had been urged by King Balak to come to his kingdom and curse the people of Israel, but God came to Balaam and warned him that he should not curse the Israelites because they were a blessed people of God. Again, urged by Balak to come to his aid, Balaam pleaded for permission from God to go. God gave him permission, but knew that his true motive was the financial reward he was to get and reminded him to speak only what he commanded. Balaam saddled up his donkey and set off. God sent an armed angel to block the way: but 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. Instead, he actually secured them Balaam’s blessing. They likely didn’t even know, at the time, that this happened. Likewise, 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 couldn’t take hold. When we take on the Lord’s protection, can we realize it? Can we acknowledge it properly?

This is a challenge we all face. We must not take the Lord’s protection for granted, but it is also fundamental to our faith. We must do our part to be open to his influence so that we can be empowered to stand up against the darkness of temptation and instead embrace the light which we have been given.

These past few weeks have served to equip us for the final journey to the Cross. We have been given tools and instruction for how to live according to God’s will, embracing him and rejecting the forces of the enemy, and now we will carry those tools with us as we journey with Christ to Jerusalem. But we are *still* in this wilderness. We are *still* wandering and lost, in need of guidance. We must learn to determine what is God’s will for us, which path *he* is leading us on as we face our trials and temptations in this wilderness. And this is as true now as it is any other time in our lives – whether Lent or not. But may we be encouraged by the gifts of grace that we have and will receive through our Lord Jesus Christ. He has offered us the protection we need, and gives us the ability to shine his light into dark corners.

So while we continue to walk through this darkness of Lent, let us continue to pay attention to the growing light around us. Let us pay attention to the lengthening days, the brighter mornings, and the signs that winter is slowly fading away. And may this light remind us of that light we bear in the name of our Lord and Saviour, who is our defence in the wilderness and the light in the dark places.