

Oculi
3 March 2024
Luke 11:14-28 (Exodus 8:16-24; Ephesians 5:1-9)

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ—Amen

The text for this morning's sermon is the Holy Gospel appointed for today from the Holy Gospel According to St. Luke, the eleventh chapter.

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit—Amen

Moses came to the Egyptians with signs and wonders. God had given him both the power and the authority to perform miracles so as to prove to the Egyptians that he acted, in their words, by the “finger of God.” The magicians told Pharaoh that this was so, “but Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said.”

The magicians and the people of Egypt suffered the effects of the plagues. So did Pharaoh himself. But his heart was hardened, and he would not let the people of Israel go, as God had directed him to do. You see, Pharaoh was not only dependent upon the labor of the Hebrews, he also depended upon his own people believing in their pagan religion—a religion which held that Pharaoh himself was a god.

It was not until Pharaoh's own crown prince, the next in line to be declared a god, would die that he would let the people go. And even then, he changed his mind. As a result, his entire army was drowned in the Red Sea.

That, dear friends, is the lesson for those who would deny the power of God, the true God, serving themselves or other false gods instead. That is the result of a hard heart, one which sees the signs and hears the Word of God, but refuses to believe because the cost of repentance is

too high. Such people only find out the cost of impenitence when the “finger of God” is upon them.

Fourteen centuries later, the “finger of God” would return. In fact, God would take on an not just a finger, but an entire body, this time not appearing to Pharaoh by means of a representative like Moses, but rather coming Himself. And instead of crossing swords with a representative of Satan like Pharaoh, Jesus comes to fight the devil, the prince of demons himself, who once more has enslaved the Hebrews and all men by drawing them away from the one true God into worshiping not just kings and Caesars, not just serving Greek and Roman gods, but also putting the Law and the lawyers, the Pharisees and the rulings of councils, above the Word of God, as if the finger of a scribe took precedence over the finger of God.

Jesus runs into the same kind of resistance to the Word of God—including the promise of God’s forgiveness, reconciliation, and blessing, as Moses did in the Exodus from Egypt. This time, the Hebrews are held in the slavery of the Law as interpreted by the fingers of hypocrites.

And this is how it is that Jesus, God in the flesh, the New and Greater Moses who represents the Hebrews, seeking their deliverance from the tyranny of Satan, is accused by His own people of being in league with the devil. Even as devils torment Israelites by possessing their bodies, the Pharisees and scribes watch Jesus casting out demons “by the finger of God,” but like Pharaoh, they are so blinded by their own power, and the worship of themselves, that they believe a lie so grotesque that Jesus calls it the unforgiveable sin.

Indeed, “the people marveled,” and many came to Jesus to be healed of incurable ailments, to be freed of the demons, to hear Him preach the Good News that the kingdom is at hand, to rejoice in the Messiah’s coming—“but some of them” instead claim, “He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons.”

And like Pharaoh, the unbelievers continue to ask for “a sign from heaven,” as the ones that He has already performed are apparently not conclusive enough. And in another sign of His divinity, our Lord knows their thoughts. Because Jesus is God, the same God whose finger was resisted by hard-hearted Pharaoh. And so, our Lord proves the ridiculousness of their delusion: “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste.... if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand?”

And our Lord calls to mind the Exodus and the deliverance of the Hebrews from the grips of Pharaoh by asking them: “If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out?”

And here, Jesus challenges them to confess and stop messing around: “But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.”

Dear friends, we may marvel at Pharaoh’s hard-heartedness, and we may be shocked at the lengths to which the children of Israel will go to deny Jesus, but our Lord’s warning is for us as well. If Jesus casts out demons by the finger of God, why do we resist His invitation to leave the slavery of Satan to be delivered by the wounded hand of God, who takes hold of us to free us from slavery?

Why would we live like the pagans and essentially deny the finger of God by not giving Jesus a second thought until next Sunday, or maybe until we are facing some plague or other in this fallen life? The time to leave Egypt is now. The time to follow the finger, the hand, the flesh and blood of God is now. The Hebrews placed the blood of the lamb on the doors of their houses, and the angel of death passed over them. God invited them. Moses preached to them. They heard and believed and obeyed. They were saved from the angel of death. And they were also delivered from Pharaoh’s tyranny and slavery. And God continued to promise the Israelites

a New and Greater Moses who would save them from a slavery even worse than that which they experienced in Egypt.

Jesus comes to us today. The finger of God is guiding us by means of the Word and the Sacraments. Jesus frees you from slavery by Holy Absolution: “I forgive you all your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Jesus cast out your demons when you were baptized in that very same divine name of God. Jesus calls you to follow Him to the Promised Land by the preaching of this Word of God, for “Blessed... are those who hear the Word of God and keep it.” And Jesus provides you with a New and Greater Passover meal, which not only points to Old Testament Passover and to all the lambs which were slain and their blood, but rather fulfills it by becoming the body and blood of the Lamb who was slain “that takest away the sin of the world.” Jesus is that Lamb to which all the Passover lambs in history have pointed.

Indeed, the Scriptures themselves serve as the finger of God which points us to Jesus, who is God in the flesh, whose blood was shed to atone for our sins, whose body was nailed to the cross for our justification, whose Word casts out demons, and whose Sacrament of the Altar is a sign, and even more than that: the miraculous presence of our Lord in the fulfillment of the Passover meal.

And because we are rescued from sin, death, and the devil by the finger of God, by Jesus working in our world with power and authority, by His Word and Sacraments, we can live not as slaves, but as free men. “Therefore,” says St. Paul, “be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

St. Paul calls Christians to a life freed from demons and Pharaohs and the filthiness of this world. Let us not resist the finger of God by refusing to remember our baptism, by making excuses not to follow Jesus from slavery to freedom. Let us not, like the Israelites, mess around and grumble and wish to go back to slavery because of our appetite for food and lusts for the things of Beelzebub.

Indeed, dear friends, we have left Egypt. We have renounced Pharaoh. We have been liberated from slavery. We have been delivered from evil. We have been taken by the hand of Jesus to bring us to the Promised Land. We experience the finger of God by hearing His Word, and by keeping it. The angel of death passes over us who eat the Paschal meal of the Lamb's flesh and blood. Satan has been cast out, for "one stronger than he" has attacked him and overcome him.

Let us not bear a hard heart, one which sees the signs and hears the Word of God, but refuses to believe because the cost of repentance is too high. Let us instead "walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true)." For Jesus has conquered the devil and freed you from bondage, has drowned your sins in the font, and puts the blood of the Passover Lamb into the doorway of your lips.

Blessed are you who hear the Word of God and keep it—the Word by which Christ assures you that you are forgiven for all your sins.

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit—Amen

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus—
Amen

Sermon based on one by the Rev. Larry Beane