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Peace Lutheran Church
Holbrook, Arizona
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TEXTS: Genesis 3:8-15; Mark 3:20-35

After two weeks of heavy sledding—the sermon about money two weeks ago, and last week about Sabbath observance—I was looking for a little “lighter” topic for today but what do I get? Adam and Eve in the Garden after the first sin with that “serpent” having beguiled them. Jesus being accused of being possessed and all that talk about demons and Satan. This mysterious business about the “unforgiveable sin” and then Jesus’ redefinition of family. All heavy stuff. Let’s roll up our sleeves and tackle it but perhaps, start with just a bit of a chuckle, harkening back to the sermon on money two weeks ago.

The pastor was preoccupied with thoughts of how he was going to ask the congregation to come up with more money to pay for some unexpected repairs to the church building. Therefore, he was annoyed to find that the regular organist was sick and a substitute had been brought in at the last minute. The substitute wanted to know what to play. “Here’s a copy of the service,” he said impatiently. “but you’ll have to think of something to play after I make the announcement about the finances.” During the service, the minister paused and said, “Brothers and sisters, we are in great difficulty. The roof repairs cost twice as much as we expected so we need \$4,000 more. Any of you who can pledge \$100 or more, please stand up.” At that moment, the substitute organist began to play “The Star Spangled Banner” whereupon the whole congregation, with respect to our nation’s flag, stood up. And that is how the substitute organist became the regular organist!”

Now on to weightier matters. If you’d like to open your Bibles to Mark, Chapter 3 you’ll see that today’s Gospel reading, which begins with verse 20, is preceded by Jesus’ healing of a man with a deformed hand after which a great crowd begins to follow this Miracle Worker. Jesus then appoints the first twelve disciples and we’re given their names. Today’s story is near the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. He’s just getting rolling and as so often the case with God’s work, Satan interferes. Satan attacks in myriad ways, as perhaps you’ve discovered in your own

life when you're starting to get things together, when your faith is becoming more important to you. The Evil One launches an assault. In this case, he stirs up the pot, causing people to accuse Jesus of being crazy. "*He has gone out of His mind,*" it says in verse 21. "He's nuts," they're saying. Name-calling has been around for a long time. People say hurtful things to discredit another when they feel threatened—and oh man, the religious leaders of Jesus' time felt threatened by all the miraculous things He'd started to do and all the crowds He was drawing. They didn't like any challenge to the status quo and, specifically, their own positions of power and privilege. They, too, join in the name calling: "*He is possessed by Beelzebul,*" they chide, "*and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.*" Now Beelzebul is the name of a false god, a Canaanite deity, an idol. Satan is the "*ruler of the demons*" and these religious leaders knew that, but at this point they're more interested in heaping scorn than they are in being precise. That's often the case when we don't understand something or we feel threatened, isn't it? We start making accusations, calling names, trying to discredit the one who is making us feel insecure.

And Jesus, very calmly answer them, "*How can Satan cast out Satan?*" He's referring, of course, to the exorcisms He's been doing, making the simple observation that Satan would not be able to cast himself out. It couldn't be Satan who was trying to get rid of Satan. It wasn't possible. No, clearly, Jesus had to be someone other than Satan, even if you didn't think He was the Messiah. Jesus goes on to make His point even clearer by pointing out that Satan wouldn't be doing all the good that Jesus had been doing because Satan would be shooting himself in the foot. Jesus was about healing and blessing and helping. Satan was about everything that is the opposite of those things so, Jesus points out, it's ridiculous to think that Satan would be doing all the Godly things Jesus was doing. I just love how articulate, how clever, how Jesus is capable of sticking-it-to-them when that's needed. And He responds to the religious leaders' charges brilliantly here.

But Jesus is vexed. He's come to liberate people from the powers of evil. To bring life and wholeness and joy. Yet the people stubbornly refuse to see Him as the Liberator, the Savior, the Messiah, in spite the many demonstrations of His power and authority. It's like the religious leaders are covering their eyes, blocking their ears and saying, "Don't confuse us with the facts. Our minds are already made up. You're evil."

In response to this, Jesus says something which has struck fear in the hearts of believers for generations. We call it “The Unforgiveable Sin” and here’s what the Bible says specifically: *“but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.”* (vs. 29) This isn’t as enigmatic as it sounds. It simply means that if someone gives credit to Satan for the good work of God, they are sealing their own fate. Unyielding refusal to believe the Gospel, rejecting the Holy Spirit’s work to create faith in Jesus, is unforgiveable—not because God won’t forgive but that those people refuse to come to God seeking it. God cannot forgive the sin of someone who doesn’t want that sin forgiven. You know the old saying, “You can lead a horse to water but you can’t make him drink?” Well this is like that. The Holy Spirit can lead you to Jesus—the Living Water—but if a person’s rebellious spirit and stubbornness of heart refuses to accept the Savior, well then...that one will not be saved. God isn’t going to force Himself down anyone’s throat. In this case, Jesus is standing right in front of them. He’s demonstrated in multiple and verifiable ways that He’s the Messiah—but if the religious leaders, or anyone, even any of us in this room—refuse to accept that, they’ve refused the good work of the Holy Spirit which has presented them with the truth and, in the case of today’s Gospel, even credited Satan with Jesus’ good work. Their own hardness of heart has condemned them. That’s the unforgiveable sin.

Was Jesus possessed? Yes, but not by Satan. No way. Jesus was possessed by the Holy Spirit—and invites us to be, too. Today, at the end of a long road whereby the Holy Spirit and Satan have been battling it out for possession of the life of this man here (refer to Dale Long), Dale has come to his senses and stands ready to say, “Jesus, you win. I submit my life to you. I’m done with this bad guy.” In the baptism liturgy we’re about to witness, Dale will be asked, “Do you renounce the devil and all the forces of evil that defy God?” Also, “Do you renounce the powers of this world (a veiled reference to Satan) that rebel against God?” And finally, “Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God?” Listen for Dale’s response. And Dale, I hope your response will be a resounding, “Yes! I renounce them.” In other words, Dale (who has been brought to this point by the unrelenting work of the Holy Spirit) is saying, “Yes, I want to be possessed—not by Satan, but by God.”

And the Good Holy Spirit works in the lives of each of us to bring us to the point of rejecting Satan and his continual attempts to possess, or control us, and inviting God to, as the old hymn says, “come into my heart”—another way of saying, “God, possess me! I’m yours!”

You know, growing up, I never thought much about this matter of possession. I was raised in the Lutheran Church and we didn’t talk much about spiritual possession then—but we should have. We left that sort of talk to the Pentecostals—but we shouldn’t have. Who has spiritual control of our lives should be a matter of utmost concern for each of us—because it matters. There are eternal consequences to this issue.

I don’t know how many of you are acquainted with this good man, Earl Tso. A couple of weeks ago, at Saturday night chapel at the Mission, Earl spoke us—and blew me and many others, I’m sure, away with his witness. He was talking about this matter of who has control of his life: Satan or God. I’ve asked Earl if he would share, briefly, what he said that night during the chapel service. (Allow Earl to do this.)

In the settlement of this country by the white man (a robbing of Native Americans of their land, which Earl pointed out in our lesson on “Thou shalt not steal” at the Mission chapel), settlers would move onto a section of land and claim it as their own by settling on it. They would take possession of a certain piece of ground by living on it and developing it as their own. They would clear it, farm it, build a house, erect fences and in various ways establish it as their own. Eventually, they’d have to file claim with the government and get title—a piece of paper—to the ground but it was their daily possession of the land which entitled them to get it as their own.

Dale here—and, I pray, each of us—has given permission to the Holy Spirit to move in and take possession of his life. God has claimed Dale as His own and is in the process of developing him—clearing him of his old and bad habits, building a house, so to speak, within Dale, establishing His residency, building barriers to keep out the bad. God is settling on Dale’s land, his heart, claiming possession. And Dale’s baptism today, is simply his trip to the government office to get the deed which verifies what’s already happened. It’s the certification, so to speak,

of the deed already done—but it’s something Jesus commanded us to do, and so we do it. And we celebrate it!

I’ve shared with you before my experiences with demonic possession in my earlier ministry. I won’t reiterate today except to say that, while I might not have been raised to think about possession, either demonic or of God, I no longer think as such. I’m very aware that there’s a battle going on for control of my soul, and for yours. Satan, whom the Bible calls the “*Prince of this world*,” (John 14:30) is not happy to relinquish any part of his realm to God. And yet God, who did not create us for any purpose other than His good purposes, is not willing to hand over any of us to Satan without a fight. And so God gives us His Holy Spirit who, unrelentingly, pursues us, nudging, urging, pushing us toward God and the surrendering of our hearts—our territory—to Him. The British poet Francis Thompson called the Holy Spirit “the Hound of heaven.”

And speaking of British Christians, I’d like to cite C.S. Lewis (who, actually, was Irish but lived and taught in England for most of his years) on this subject of Satan. I think Lewis offers wise counsel in his masterpiece about Satan called *The Screwtape Letters*. He writes, “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors...” In other words, don’t ignore the Evil One or pretend he’s not alive and active. On the other hand, don’t obsess about him either. Live with an awareness of his presence and influence, but remember that ultimately, God wins. Jesus’ resurrection at Easter is our guarantee of that: God wins. We needn’t fear.

When we allow God to stake His claim to our hearts, when we give Him possession of our lives, our relationship with Him changes. We are no longer just His creations; we become His children, members of His family. Take a look at the conclusion to our Gospel reading. Jesus is told that His mother and brothers are looking for Him. Jesus looks around at those who were sitting with Him and said, “*Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.*” (vs. 34-35) You see, we become family when we allow God to possess us. While baptism is many things, it is certainly an initiation rite by which Dale becomes a part of the Church, the family of God. So, Dale...welcome to the family! Amen.

The service continues with Dale's baptism, followed by the viewing/hearing of a YouTube video: "No Longer Slaves" composed by Brian Johnson, Jonathan David Helger, & Joel Case and performed by The Voices of Lee.

Songs:

Opening	"Rise, Shine, You People!" (ELW#665)
Psalm	"Out Of The Depths I Cry To You" (ELW#600 but read as a poetic hymn with the tune played softly in the background)
Following Baptism	"No Longer Slaves" (YouTube Video featuring the Voices Of Lee)
Closing	"Amazing Grace/My Chains Are Gone"