

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

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

In our Gospel text this morning we encounter Jesus, the stronger man, who overcomes Satan and takes away his armor. Then we are warned about letting our guard down, because our adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. If given the chance, the unclean spirit will return, and when it does, it's with a vengeance. Jesus says:

*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.*

The modern world wants to know nothing of Satan, the demons, or the cosmic powers over this present darkness and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (Eph 6:12). The Bible, though, presents for us a world of good and evil, right and wrong, light and darkness, angels and demons, God and the Devil. Jesus and all the prophets and apostles in Holy Scripture assume a supernatural world that influences what is going on in the natural world. We are characters in the unfolding drama of world history, actors in a supernatural battle which has been waged since before we were born and unless the Lord returns, will continue after our part is over. We are wrestling not just with flesh and blood but with spiritual forces which largely remain unseen. In the Scriptures, however, we see the curtain pulled back a bit and we behold the true powers of light and darkness that are contending behind the scenes.

Again, the modern world wants to know nothing of this true battle being waged. For the last few hundred years, the supernatural has been explained away and accounted for with natural

explanations. Of course, many occurrences that were once attributed to the supernatural really can be explained by natural causes, at least to a point: thunder and lightning, various illnesses of body and mind, the changing of the seasons. Occurrences once attributed solely to supernatural causes can be quite natural. Yet we ought not completely negate the supernatural. We should not fall into the trap of explaining everything away because things *can* be explained in a natural way. The supernatural always works in tandem with the natural and really cannot be separated from it, in the same way the body and soul cannot be separated. What affects the body affects the soul and what affects the soul affects the body. The natural and the supernatural, what is of nature and what is above nature, always relate to each other.

People may wonder: “If there really are demons then why don’t we experience them today? If there really is a devil, then why don’t we see any evidence for his existence?” The best propaganda is the hardest to detect. Sometimes the demons will work to scare people, or to tempt them with power and wealth. At other times, the demons will tempt people into thinking there’s nothing to life beyond what we experience. But one of the best tricks of the Devil is to convince people that he doesn’t exist, that there is nothing supernatural, nothing good or evil, but that all things are relative or a matter of taste. The Devil doesn’t care whether or not people believe in him, as long as he can get people to question God’s existence or God’s care for us. Satan is willing to sacrifice His own fame if it means that at the same time people won’t give thought to the God who is over all things.

God is above nature, He is supernatural, and yet He entered his creation to die on the cross and redeem us from sin, death, and the Devil. At the cross, Satan looked quite strong. He riled up the people and put it into the heart of Judas to betray our Lord. The Devil worked through the rulers of the people to kill Jesus unjustly. Nailed to the cross, Christ looked weak and

helpless, yet He was crushing the head of the serpent by sacrificing Himself for the sins of the people. Satan is strong, but Jesus is stronger. It may have looked like the Devil had won, but Jesus's death was not the end. He descended into Hell to proclaim His victory to the imprisoned spirits (1 Pet 3:19). There, our Lord conquered the devil, destroyed Hell's power over believers, and took from the Devil all his might. And then by His resurrection, our Lord swallowed up death forever and triumphed over Satan and all the powers of darkness.

Our Lord continues working even today to destroy the Devil and his work in our lives. In the Church, the most common place we experience the demonic and the exorcizing of demons is at Holy Baptism. In the baptismal rite there's an exorcism, which sounds like this: "the Word of God . . . teaches that we are all conceived and born sinful and are under the power of the devil until Christ claims us as His own. Therefore, depart, you unclean spirit, and make room for the Holy Spirit in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." We ask the one to be baptized: "Do you renounce the devil? Do you renounce all his works? Do you renounce all his ways?" Then comes a confession of the Christian faith in the words of the Apostles' Creed and baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity.

So Baptism itself is a kind of exorcism, the casting out of an unclean spirit to make way for the Holy Spirit. In Baptism, the stronger man, Jesus Christ, attacks and overcomes the strong man, the Devil. As Christ defeated Satan by dying on the cross, so in Baptism does Jesus apply that victory to us personally. God takes the person who was under the power and sway of demonic darkness and transfers that person into the kingdom of light. Jesus casts out demons by the finger of God, the Holy Spirit, and so we know that the Kingdom of God has come upon us. Apart from that Kingdom of God, we would still be subject to Satan, the ruler of this world (John

12:31). Instead, Jesus makes us His own and gives us the armor we need to ward off the powers of darkness.

Jesus then warns those who have received the gift of the Holy Spirit in Baptism that the war is not over. In fact, the battle has only just begun. The unclean spirit might depart for a time, but it will be back with reinforcements. There is no neutrality in this war. Either the unclean spirit will rule our life or the Holy Spirit will. If the unclean spirit is cast out but not replaced with the Spirit of Christ, then we only prepare the way for something worse. The unclean spirit will return with even more unclean spirits, who will find the house swept and put in good order, that is, the unclean spirit will find an empty heart ready to receive him again, a heart ready to return to the futile works of darkness and worse. This is a constant danger for the Christian and it's why Jesus warns us about how the demons operate. This is also why Scripture warns repeatedly that the consequences of apostasy, or falling away from the faith, are worse than if someone never believed in the first place. Without defense, the works of darkness will only compound.

And so our LORD does not leave us without weapons for the fight. "Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it." We are given the sword of the spirit, the written Word of God, as a weapon to defend and attack the onslaught of the evil foe. We have the belt of truth and the breastplate of Christ's righteousness. We have the readiness given by the Gospel of peace, and the shield of faith to extinguish the enemy's darts. Our helmet is Christ, who is our salvation. We have the power of prayer, knowing that the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working (James 5:16), and so we pray at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication. We pray "deliver us from evil," that is, "deliver us from the evil one," rescue us from Satan and

all the works of darkness waging war against us. This armor the Lord gives us is more powerful than anything the Devil could throw our way.

Our LORD gives us the weapons of the Word and the Sacraments. We defend ourselves against Satan's attacks with the Word of God and when we fall, we return to our Baptism by confessing our sins and receiving absolution. We are healed by Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper, which are given to reassure our weak consciences. Here Christ's body and blood enter our body, and we are reminded that He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world (1 John 4:4). In Baptism we are no longer children of darkness but children of light, and so we walk as children of light, fighting against the powers of darkness which continue to wage a war against us, both inside and out. The life of Baptism is a life of continual defense against unclean spirits, against the temptation to return to the enemy. We do not fight alone. It is the Lord who fights for you (Ex 14:14). He is the one stronger than Satan and all his horde, stronger than any accusations that can be brought against you, stronger even than your own weaknesses and failings. Jesus is the valiant one who conquers the Devil for you, and He will keep you from all evil (Ps 121:7). Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:57). In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.