

The First Sunday in Lent – 2022

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

Do you know how to defend yourself? Here's a creepy poem. "Yesterday, upon the stair, I met a man who wasn't there! He wasn't there again today. I wish, I wish, he'd go away. When I came home last night at three, the man was waiting there for me. But when I looked around the hall, I couldn't see him there at all. Go away, go away! Don't you come back anymore. Go away, go away! And please don't slam the door" (Antigonish – William Hughes Mearns).

The demonic skulks in shadows. It's never easy to confront something so slippery, so evasive and formless. David had his enemy right in front of him. Goliath – now there's a tangible target. Five smooth stones and a sling-shot; one stone sunk deep into the giant's skull and then David seized Goliath's own sword and took off his head. Do you know how to defend yourself? I'm not talking about a can of mace, or a conceal carry license, or a few Taekwondo lessons – I'm talking about spiritual battle – do you know how to defend yourself? You men better know. Fat lot of good you are in Christ's kingdom if you don't know how to defend yourself. You would instinctively, readily, aggressively defend your family if they were under threat, wouldn't you? This is a spiritual world. Not just a physical reality did God create; this is a spiritual world. We don't wrestle with flesh and blood. We contend with the spiritual forces of evil. They are real. And you women folk, you can be as strong as anyone, spiritually agile, powerful forces for good, defending the truth, discerning darkness when it encroaches and responding to it with the light of Christ. Do you know how to defend yourself?

Defense starts with knowing what Christ has done. In the cosmic battle for humanity, God chose His weapon. We are called to take up the whole armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-20). Jesus Himself was God's weapon. His armor was His flesh, His righteousness, His willingness to suffer. He had come to contend with Satan. He had come to crush the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15). He had come to undo an ancient defeat. Immediately upon being baptized, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the desert. Jesus' baptism is His ordination as the Christ, the anointed. At the Jordan, the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus bodily in the form of a dove and the Father's voice was heard: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). Jesus' baptism is the starting point for His public ministry and immediately His mission takes Him to confront our enemy. Long had this encounter been on the Son of God's agenda.

Satan had been down this road before. Man had proven himself to be an easy target for the devil's wiles. Can you imagine the confidence that swelled in Satan's mind as Jesus came into his domain, the wilderness, the haunt of jackals? David, God's own chosen king, fell to lust, adultery and murder (2 Samuel 11). Aaron, Moses' brother and the first high priest, crafted a golden calf, a rank idol, for the newly delivered Israelites. This "man of God" said words that Satan could well take credit for: "I threw [the peoples' gold] into the fire and out came this calf" (Exodus 32:24). But it all began with Adam. In the Garden, with every advantage, Adam proved to be easily taken captive by the father of lies (Colossians 2:8). Adam ate. God had breathed into Adam the breath of life and Adam ate from the tree that God had commanded him

not to eat. Satan had tempted the first couple and they bit. Hell had obtained a race of slaves. The devil, the strong man, fully intended to protect what he had won.

Comes now Jesus. With what is He armed? With what does He contend with Satan? Radical fidelity to His Father, an inherent purity, divine humility, an unbreakable solidarity with humanity, a quiet but resolved spirit – He is the Stronger Man who fully intends to bind and overcome the strong man and reclaim humanity for the Father (Luke 11:21-22). He will use Satan's own weapon, death, to take off the serpent's head. He denies Himself; He picks up His cross and He pours out His blood. But first, the desert. But first, a series of temptations. But first, a forty-day hunger and a Garden of Eden recapitulation. The devil must've heard what the Father said at Jesus' baptism for it serves as a caustic introduction: "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread" (Luke 4:3). No true son would do it. No true son would serve himself at the expense of his Father's will. It is a seduction in the face of which we have all failed: serve yourself. Not Christ; He came to serve, to give His life for many (Matthew 20:28).

He feeds you. There is no way that He could feed you with the food you need if He had served Himself, turning a stone into bread. He fed the five thousand with five loaves and two fish (Matthew 14:13-21). He reclined at table on the night when He was betrayed and He gave His disciples the banquet of His body and the grace of His blood (Luke 22:14-23). He feeds you in the same way. He is the True Son. He is the bread of life (John 6:35). He is your daily bread. On one occasion, His disciples urged Jesus to eat. His reply is the reason you are in this holy house. Jesus said this: "I have food to eat that you know nothing about. My food is to do the will of him who sent me and accomplish his work" (John 4:31, 34). So, did He? Did He accomplish your salvation? Did He do entirely and magnificently the will of the One who sent Him? Did Jesus the Christ, on the holy cross, accomplish triumphantly the work of redemption that was given to Him to do? Oh, yes.

Satan's petty temptations had no effect on the second, greater Adam – the true Son of God (Luke 3:38). Every empty promise, every tantalizing falsehood, every snake oil enticement was met with the same simple but majestic retort: "It is written." "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone.'" "It is written, 'you shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.'" "It is said, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" What a victory! So, why do we often behave as though Christ has not thoroughly defeated our enemy? Why do we often think in a way that puts Satan over Christ, evil over goodness, death over life? The victory has been won! The Kingdom ours remaineth! (A Mighty Fortress is Our God, stanza 4).

We need to be able to defend ourselves and those whom God gives us to protect. The first, best step is to know precisely what Christ has done and rehearse it, speak it, revel in it, and shelter ourselves in His victory. He made a public spectacle of the forces of evil (Colossians 2:15). He exposed them as empty, powerless and defeated as He hung on the cross. In this Divine Service the forces of evil are exposed as empty, powerless, and defeated.

The world is chaotic and deeply unwise. You are not ruled by the world's vain philosophy. You belong to Christ. He is your defense. I realize that there is great anxiety at the war that is raging in Eastern Europe. The unholy assault on innocent life is catastrophic and appears patently

demonic. God is near to those who suffer. He knows our plight and His empathy prompts action. Christ and His cross stand in the midst of chaos and delivers people from fear and despair. Far from being weary, far from the church being resigned to a diminishing voice or a desire to go back to the “good old days,” we have a Word to speak. Now! We have a Christian life to lead. We have children to raise and the sick to nurse and the elderly to love and the wayward to call back and the unbelieving to evangelize. Christ has met our enemy and triumphed. Tell the world!

Do you know how to defend yourself? Here’s a smooth stone you can use when the devil would tempt you to doubt: “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work” (1 John 3:8). Here’s a smooth stone you can use when the devil tempts you to think that God has forgotten you: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:27-28). And here is a smooth stone to use when the prince of darkness tries to exclude you from the kingdom because of your sin: “Christ died for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit” (1 Peter 3:18).

We are remarkably well defended. Christ our King is among us with His Easter victory to bless us with hope and confidence and joy and peace. We will meet what comes our way with humility and trust that God’s will is being done, in us. We are fed. This day, we are fed. We receive the bread of His body and the wine of His blood. Christ and His bride, the church, are one. He will always defend us.