

## First Sunday in Lent

Monday Luke 5: 33-35

### Burying the Alleluias

There may be a strange addition to your church now. You might have a trunk, a chest, maybe even a miniature coffin somewhere in the chancel area. In that chest is a banner with the word "alleluia." "Alleluia" is a word Christians shout in joy and praise to the God who saves them by His grace. Why then is the banner locked up in a chest now?

Locking up an alleluia banner in a chest is called "burying the alleluias." This is an old practice that usually takes place on the Last Sunday after Epiphany. Epiphany you might remember is an extension of the Christmas season. The "Joy to the World" that we celebrate at Christmas because Jesus has come to save us is now locked away for the season of Lent.

Lent is a penitential season. It is a time when we remember our sins and what Jesus had to go through to redeem us from sin, death, and the power of the devil. We bury the alleluias to symbolize that during this six week time of Lent we are voluntarily muting our joy. But do not misunderstand. Jesus is still our Savior; our sins are still forgiven. The joy of Christmas is still ours. We just do not express it as fully as we could.

Why? What if you had Christmas everyday or even just every week? What if each week there was a tree, presents, and Christmas food? Would not the joy of Christmas start to be an everyday thing to you? I mean could you eat your favorite food everyday or even every week and not start to grow tired of it, start to take it for granted?

We sinners can do that with any blessing of God even the forgiveness of sins we have in Jesus. So, as a way to help us remember what a joy, what a blessing, what a wonder Jesus and things He did to win us forgiveness are, we do not express our full joy for a few weeks. We do not use our full joy for awhile, so that when we do, it is all the more joyous. There is a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to rejoice and a time to mute our joy. There is a time for burying and a time for raising from the dead. We bury our alleluias for a time, so that we can sing them all the louder come Easter.

Prayer: O almighty and eternal God, we implore You to direct, sanctify, and govern our hearts and bodies in the ways of Your laws and the works of Your commandments that through Your mighty protection, both now and ever, we may be preserved in body and soul; through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Tuesday Genesis 3:1

### The Enduring Question

When the devil tempted Jesus in the wilderness, he said to Him, "If you are the Son of God..." The Father, in the Baptism of Jesus, had just finished declaring loudly, "This is My beloved Son." But that is the way of the devil always to question the Word of God. You see him doing that with Eve in the Garden. He questions, "Did God really say you, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'"

This is the enduring question, this is the question that has been around as long as time and will be asked in this fallen world till time's end: "Did God really say?" The way of the devil is not to start out making assertions or statements, "God did not say!" No, he starts with a polite, gentle question: "Did God *really* say?" The devil knows he must get us away from God's Word because neither men, women, or children live by bread alone but from every Word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.

We need God's Word. It is the Word of God that gives us eternal life in Baptism. It is the Word of God that forgives us our sins in Absolution. It is the Word of God that gives us Christ's Body and Blood in Holy Communion. Satan wants to drive a wedge, a question mark, between God's Word and us. Because he too knows that only by God's Word do we live.

And you know what? We cannot stop him. Satan will always ask this question, "Did God really say?" This question of his will be with us till we are in heaven where everyone lives by what God says. So, like Eve and Jesus, when we hear the devil's question, "Did God really say," we respond with what God says. How He said it, why He said it is not something we need to look into. God is the only One who needs to answer for what He says.

But we do not live by how well we answer the devil; we do not live even from how certain the Word of God is to us. We live by what Jesus did. He answered the devil perfectly and never doubted what God said. We stand because Jesus did, not because we answer correctly that enduring question. Though our hearts may be tempted and confused by Satan's enduring question, Jesus' Words remain sure, "Nothing can pluck you out of My hand."

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Thursday Genesis 3:4

### Unconditional Life

The devil is very smart. He knows that fallen sinners, doomed to die desire, crave, thirst for life. So he promises it. He tells Eve in the garden that she will live. He tells Jesus in the Temptation that even if He throws Himself off the Temple, He will live no matter what. The devil even proves this with a Bible passage. The devil promises unconditional life.

God promises life too. But His promise of life is linked to the Means of Grace. Sinners doomed to die live in Baptism. Sinners whose sins merit everlasting death are forgiven and live in Absolution. Sinners whose bodies are decaying to death every moment of life are given life and salvation in the Holy Communion.

The devil is very much at work wherever God's people are found. Someone once said that where God builds a church, the devil builds a chapel. The Gospel of Jesus Christ says that sinners live unconditionally because of the suffering and death of Jesus which is theirs through Baptism, Absolution, and Holy Communion. The devil tells sinners that they live no matter what because of Jesus. They can ignore their Baptisms. They can get by without hearing the Absolution. They can stay away from the Body and Blood of Christ for as long as they feel like it, and it does not matter. A Jesus is unconditional life, says the devil.

This is the lie of the devil. There is life in Jesus all right, but Jesus brings this life to sinners ONLY through the Means of Grace. When sinners separate themselves from the Means of Grace, they die because the Means of Grace is the only way for the life Jesus won on the cross to get to sinners. A vine gives life to its branches without conditions, without fail, but if the branch is separated from the vine, it withers and dies without fail.

The very Good News is that Jesus never holds back His life from sinners. Baptism is for all sinners in every nation. Absolution is for all sins and all sinners. His Body and Blood is in Holy Communion for just as many as that same Body and Blood hung on the cross for, that is, for everyone.

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Friday Genesis 3:5

### You Shall be as gods!

The sinner's great desire is to take the place of God. Satan poses as the great fulfiller of the desires of sinners, and so he promises Eve, "You shall be as gods if you eat from the Tree God commanded you not to." We should not think that we will not be tempted this way. The devil even tempted Jesus this way. He took Him up to a high mountain, showed Him all the kingdoms of the world, and said, "I will give you all this. I will make you the god of all these kingdoms."

It is tempting to play God, to explain what God does not explain, to do what God does not do - foretell the future, try to contact the dead. The powers of science and technology in our day can be used this way. Cloning and genetic engineering are attempts at being gods. Even Christians try. They try to explain what God does not: why did He let man fall? How in a perfect heaven could the devil even exist? Why did this bad thing happen? Or, Christians try to do the godly thing of filling their churches and make them grow using all sorts of gimmicks that could make any organization grow in size and numbers.

The promise, "You shall be as gods," is a great one, but it comes from the devil and he always lies. God's promise in Jesus is, "You shall be God's," that is, AYou shall be possessions of God.≡ That is what Jesus says, "Even though you are full of sin and death and have no legitimate place in heaven, you shall indeed belong to God for all eternity."

Jesus, as we say in the Catechism, "purchased and won us from all sin, death, and the power of the devil." Jesus by His innocent suffering and death and by His Holy precious blood bought us to be God's possession. Belonging to God is a greater miracle than being gods because it means the impossible: sinners go to heaven. If God can do this, save the unsaveable, forgive the unforgivable, mercy the unmerciful, then we can certainly, be still and know that He is God as the Psalm writer says.

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Saturday Luke 4:13

### An Opportune Time

In the reading for today, we read that the devil left Jesus "until an opportune time." The devil was not finished with Jesus yet. He was just waiting for a good time to attack. Later on he will enter into Judas and the leaders of the church of that day as they plot to bring Jesus to the cross. Look at how Jesus is mocked on the cross, especially in the Gospel of Matthew, and you will hear the voice of Satan in the mocking.

Satan is a frightening beast. In Luther's hymn "A Mighty Fortress," we sing "on earth is not his equal." It is scary to see how he plots against Jesus and against Jesus' followers. It gives me the creeps to think of the Evil One marking his calendar, checking his watch to show up at just the right time.

But God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit remains the Lord of all time. The devil has to look for just the right time because he does not control it. God on the other hand does. He can make the sun to stand still as He did in Joshua or make it go backward as He did in Isaiah. While the devil has to plot and scheme to try to get what he wants, what God wills always happens.

And here we are at the great mystery. Satan wanted to plot to torture and murder Jesus. God wanted that to happen. Satan did not realize that God's plan was for Jesus to take our place under the wrath and judgment that sinners deserve. Satan did not realize that God wanted His own Son to suffer eternal hell in time, so that we might enjoy eternal life. Satan did not realize that all of his plotting and scheming for an opportune time only fulfilled God's eternal purposes in time.

So it is for us. Satan plots and plans. He looks for every opportunity to hurt us in time. But our God is the Lord of time. At no time are we at the mercy of Satan's plotting. We are always in the hands of our loving Father. All of Satan's schemes can only lead to one end, our blessing, our eternal life. If Satan's very worst plot, the torturing and killing of Jesus, could lead to our being forgiven, resurrected, and saved, then surely all of his lesser plots must be serving us too.

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