

Lent III

Monday Ephesians 2:1

The Little Engine that Cannot

Everybody knows the little engine that could. It was hauling a heavy load, and as it chugged up the hill, it started to say, "I think I can. I think I can. I think I can." As it gained speed it started proclaiming, "I know I can! I know I can!" In the story it reaches the top of the hill with its heavy load.

How does that story compare with our Collect for this week? There is no "think I can" in it, is there? We plainly say that "we of ourselves have no strength." And this agrees with our Bible reading, does not it? We were dead in transgressions and sins. Dead things cannot do anything no matter how much they want to, no matter how much they think they can, no matter how positive or confident they might be. The only kind of little engines the Collect and our Bible reading knows are little engines that cannot.

This of course flies in the face of the wisdom of the world. All you need to do is listen to any famous actor or athlete and sooner or later you will hear him or her say, "All you have to do is believe in yourself." Does that agree with our prayer or Bible reading? If you have no strength in yourself, should you believe in yourself? If you are dead in transgressions and sins, should you believe in yourself?

However, when we know that we cannot Jesus shines all the brighter as the One who can! Jesus did not come into the world to help little engines do better or even their best. No, He came into the world to take their place and do what they could never do. He took the place of us who are dead in our sins keeping the laws we could never keep and paying for our breaking them. Jesus hitched Himself to us and took us all the way to heaven's highest hill. Jesus took the load of sin and death that we could never move and moved it out of the way for good.

Telling yourself, "I think I can. I think I can." may be a confidence builder, but we are more interested in going to heaven. Therefore, we say, "Jesus could and did." "Jesus could and did for me!"

Prayer: Almighty God, because You know that we of ourselves have no strength, keep us both outwardly and inwardly that we may be defended from all adversities that may happen to the body and from all evil thoughts that may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

Tuesday Psalm 91:11

More than You will Ever Know

You might have watched war movies in which the good guys are shown at their base camp surrounded by fields with woods in the distance. All of a sudden the grass sprouts heads, the bushes begin to walk, and bunches of leaves grow arms and legs. They were surrounded by their enemies, but they did not even know it!

We are praying in the Collect for this week about being kept inwardly and outwardly Afrom all adversities that may happen to the body and from all evil thoughts that may assault the soul.≡ We do not bother to list them because there are too many, and we do not even know them all. Martin Luther said that if we could see all the spears and arrows the devil has aimed at us and all the evil things the devil would like to do to us, we would faint from fright.

Thanks be to God that we cannot see; moreover, we are not suppose to be speculating either. There is One, however, who does see. There is One who knows more about what the devil and his angels would like to do than even they know. This One is our God and Savior Jesus Christ. This One according to Psalm 91:1 Awill command His angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.≡

We do not know what the devil would like to do to us, what traps, snares, pitfalls he has planned for us. We cannot see his soldiers creeping in, camouflaged, but that does not matter. We are not in our hands, but in the hands of the angels Jesus has entrusted us to. There are many different ways to be attacked, many different weak spots in our defenses, but we need not worry. Jesus has His angels marching guard, encamping around us in our ways, every day. No matter what should ever happen to us, we can be certain it will not have happened to us because the angels Jesus sent were somehow falling down on the job or there were not enough of them to do the job.

My mother once told me that as many corners as I could find in a room that is how many of God=s angels were in it. Of course, this is not a Bible truth, but when I was scared, even while in the Army as a young man, I would count the corners in a room to remind myself how completely God=s angels were watching over me.

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Thursday Ephesians 6:16

We are Attacked

We pray this week "that we may be defended...from all evil thoughts that may assault and hurt the soul." By praying this we recognize that we are under attack. Evil thoughts of all different types are continually bursting forth in our mind like fireworks on 4th of July. A chief source of evil thoughts is the evil one, the devil himself.

In our Bible reading, St. Paul speaks of the devil shooting flaming darts at us. He says that we are to defend against them using the shield of faith to put them out. Paul is using imagery that was very familiar to his readers though not to us. Paul describes the large Roman shield which was carried by soldiers. It was covered with leather. The soldiers would soak their shields in water, so that when flaming arrows were shot at them by the enemy, they would be put out when they landed in their shield.

But please note, St. Paul does not say or teach that YOUR faith is a shield. This is again the error of positive thinking, thinking if I believe something will not happen, it will not. This is having faith in faith, not faith in Jesus. What Paul says in Greek is your shield is THE faith, not the believing going on in your heart but the doctrine, the teachings of the Christian Faith.

Yes, the teaching that God loves you more than His only Son quenches the dart of worry. The teaching of the Christian Faith that there is no condemnation even to sinners in Christ puts out the flaming dart of guilt. The teaching of the Faith that those who have been baptized have died and risen already with Christ extinguishes the flaming dart that says we are at the devil's mercy. In fact, Paul might want to remind us specifically of the doctrine of Baptism by pointing to the shield of the Faith that is able to put out flaming arrows. What other Water do we have to soak in? It is quite a picture to see ourselves as standing in our baptismal water with the devil's arrows reigning down all around us. Cannot you just hear them sizzling out one by one?

Prayer: Almighty God, because You know that we of ourselves have no strength, keep us both outwardly and inwardly that we may be defended from all adversities that may happen to the body and from all evil thoughts that may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

Friday 2 Corinthians 7: 9-10

Repentance Not Despair

As you pray this Collect and others, perhaps you are struck with just how helplessly sinful we really are. "We of ourselves have no strength." We cannot help being assaulted by evil thoughts. They just keep on coming. Even in church, even during prayer, even while going to Holy Communion, there is an endless line of sinful thoughts. If the thoughts are this dark, how black our hearts? If the stream is this polluted, how filthy the spring? If the fruits be this rotten, how decayed the tree?

The purpose, however, of God exposing our wicked hearts is not to lead us to despair. The devil, the world, and our flesh seek to lead us to despair. We pray in the Lord's Prayer for the Lord to protect us from temptation. In our Catechism, we say that we are asking "that God would guard and keep us, so that the devil, the world, and our flesh may not deceive us nor seduce us into misbelief, DESPAIR, and other great shame and vice."

When we are tempted to despair, when we find ourselves despairing we can know for sure that this not what God wants. Yes, God wants us to see how really filthy our hearts are so that we might be led to godly sorrow which brings repentance and leads to salvation. God leads His children to repentance not to despair.

When we are overwhelmed with just how sinful we are, we are to remember that this is nothing new to God. He knows our sins even better than we do, and that is why He sent His Son into the world. He sent His Son to bear and pay for our sins. Repentance recognizes that Jesus did this for us. Despair denies that Jesus did it. Despair says, "O no, Jesus did not pay for my sins; they are still on me." Despair says, "I own my sins, not Jesus."

Diamonds in a jewelry store are always displayed on black cloth. This is so they show up all the brighter. When the Law exposes our sinful hearts in all their wickedness, when we see just how black and filthy the stream of thoughts pouring out of us is, then the Gospel of Jesus for sinners shines all the brighter. Then His salvation is all the richer, all the more gracious, all the more lovely.

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Saturday Psalm 103: 13-14

He Knows Us

Do not you think God gets tired of us? We come confessing the same sins time and again. We try and fail to do good the same way repeatedly. What does a loving father do when his child tries and tries to lift the grocery bag but cannot? What does a loving father do when his child tries to push the lawn mower but does not even budge it? Does a loving father get fed up with a child who is too small to lift a grocery bag? Does he turn away in disgust from a child too weak to push a lawn mower? Of course not. Let us not think the love of a sinful earthy father could be bigger or better than that of our holy, heavenly Father.

Today's Bible reading tells us that God has compassion on His children. "He knows how we are formed, He remembers that we are but dust." Is He disgusted with us that we cannot pick up the heavy bag full of the 10 Commandments? Does He turn away from us when we cannot even budge the lawn mower of His Law? He is no more surprised that we cannot do these things than a loving father is surprised by the weakness of His children, and He does what a loving father does. In Christ, He picked up the 10 Commandments; in Christ, He pushed the lawn mower till all the Commandments were kept.

But what about the fact that not only do we fail to pick up the grocery bag and push the lawn mower, but in our sinfulness, we do not want to? Yes, what is the answer to such wretched sinfulness? The only answer is God's forgiveness. Without any merit or worthiness in us, God forgives our sins. Psalm 103 says God, all on His own, separates our sins from us. For Christ's sake, our loving heavenly Father, does not deal with us according to our sins but according to His forgiving love.

He knows how weak, frail, and downright sinful we are. So He knows that unless He does it all there is no way we can be saved. So He sent His Son into our dust to lift this dust of ours all the way to heaven itself. Yes, God, all on His own, without our asking or being good or even trying, decided to redeem us who are made of dust. So, certainly He is not surprised when we show ourselves to be dust. No, He is compassionate, gracious, and forgiving. He never forgets that we are but dust.

Prayer: Almighty God, because You know that we of ourselves have no strength, keep us both outwardly and inwardly that we may be defended from all adversities that may happen to the body and from all evil thoughts that may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen