

Lent 3 (2024)

“He has met his match.” We’ve all heard that expression, haven’t we?

Only in the story I am going to tell you the protagonist is a female.

Over 30 years ago there was quite row in McCaysville. A new mayor and council were elected. All but one council member were ladies.

At first things went well, but within a few months conflict developed between the mayor and a majority of council members. The town was divided down the middle.

Things began to get ugly. One business owner who opposed the mayor’s regime found a wreath of dead roses sprayed black outside the door of her electronic shop across from the city hall.

Council meetings were a circus. Both the mayor's supporters and her opponents packed the city hall. I shall never forget one in particular. Just before the meeting was to begin, in walked Louise Helton, a formidable opponent of the mayor.

I wish you could have been there to see it. The closest thing I can compare what followed was the parting of the Red Sea waters in the days of Moses. People moved back, a path was opened. She went through.

Someone whispered, **“The mayor has met her match.”**

We like stories like that. A strong man – in this case, a strong woman – enters and the tables are turned.

Something like this happens in the story Jesus tells in today's Gospel. In verses 21 and 22, He says:

“When a strong man armed keepeth his palace, his goods are in peace:

“But when a stronger than he shall come upon him, and overcome him, he taketh from him all his armour wherein he trusted”

The strong man here is Satan spoken of as Beelzebub, a name which mean literally “lord of the flies.”

The stronger, the champion, the one who turns the tables, is none other than Jesus Himself.

The story Jesus tells here intersects with our story. It does so in this way:

We humans have ‘issues’, to use today’s buzz word.

You can, if you like, call them anxieties, alienations, addictions, maladjustments, destructive behaviors, harmful habits, psychological hangups.

You can even pull out a word seldom heard in today's church . . . one that has been tucked away in what Dr. Fred Craddock once called the "church's vocabulary vault," It is *sins*.

It's not very popular, but you can bring it out if you like.

Whatever terminology you use, we've all come short of the glory of God and stand in need of fixing. We need God's grace or help. Beelzebub remains at work in the world and in ourselves. Put another way, we are in bondage.

The Good News – pulling out yet another word, rather a phrase, from this vault – an old-fashioned-sounding one – “Jesus saves.”

He comes bringing hope and healing, relief and rescue. Surely a cause for celebration.

*Sing above the battle strife:
Jesus saves! Jesus saves!
By His death and endless life:
Jesus saves! Jesus saves.*

. . . says the words of an old Gospel song.

You might have had a bad start. Your parents may have made mistakes. You may have been victimized. You may have fallen into vicious habits. You may be experiencing fightings within, fears without.

But you don't have to allow those things to define your life and defeat you. The 'lord of the flies' has met his match. A stronger than he has come. Jesus saves! Jesus saves!

That is at least one thing we can take away from today's Gospel, one I find very encouraging. I hope you do as well.

Another, equally important, is that Jesus surpasses all other contenders.

As today's passage opens, Jesus has cast out a demon causing a man to be unable to speak.

The significance of this part of the story is that the Jews had exorcists who could seemingly cast out demons. But for them to do so, they had to get the demon to reveal his name. That was part of their ritual.

In this case, because the demon was mute, or rather had rendered the man mute, they were powerless. No name, no deliverance.

But Jesus was not powerless. His superiority over these Jewish exorcists might be compared

to Moses' superiority over the magicians of Egypt.

You remember the story, I am sure. Moses came before Pharaoh seeking the release of the enslaved Hebrews. Acting according to God's directions, he came with signs and wonders.

In the beginning, the Egyptian magicians could replicate the signs Moses performed. For example, they could follow his lead in turning a rod into a serpent.

But there came a point where they could not. The living God active in Moses was shown to be the real deal, the God who brooks no rivals, the stronger than the strong.

The same was true with Jesus and Jewish exorcists. It was not that they were bad men, but that Jesus was better.

His signs and wonders signaled the arrival of the long-awaited Kingdom of God. The Almighty was in their midst.

What might we take away from this part of the story?

I think it is this: Jesus can bring rescue and help in our lives, including in the areas I mentioned earlier, because He is more than a prophet or teacher or magician or exorcist. He is God come in the flesh. He puts a human face on the invisible God as no one in all of history.

There are no doubt things we can learn from Oprah, Dr. Phil and other self-help gurus.

There are nuggets of truth to be found in the other great world religions. These should not be passed over.

Nevertheless, Jesus outpaces them all. He comes bringing more than good advice.

Instead of telling us how to be happier and how to be more fully integrated human beings, He brings forgiveness and transformation.

This transformation is from the inside out. He does not put a new coat on a man. He puts a new man in the coat.

Self-reformation, putting away some bad habits, may help in the short term, but what really is needed is an invasion . . . God coming in and taking control of every room of our life.

Have you let Him do that in your life? Or do you still have some ‘go no further’ signs on some doors?

Leaving a void, as Jesus indicates, can be dangerous. We need to be filled with life from above, and that is what the Holy Spirit does.

Open the door and let Him in, not just into the foyer or the living room, but into every room.

Judson W. Van DeVenter's hymn puts us on the right track.

*All to Jesus I surrender,
Lord, I give myself to Thee;
Fill me with Thy love and power,
Let Thy blessing fall on me.*

Jesus can do what no other can. He outpaces the Jewish exorcists and every other human agent. Give Him your all.

In closing, the responses to Jesus we find in today's Gospel are still with us.

There was outright hostility from the religious leaders of the day. They accused him of casting out Satan by the power of Satan. A totally ludicrous suggestion, as commentator F.F. Bruce makes clear when he says: **“Satan may be wicked, but he is not a fool.”**

Then there were those who wanted to sit on the fence. They asked for more signs. These are still around today. There is only one problem with this response: an undecided vote is a no-vote. It is possible to be almost persuaded, but lost.

But there was still a third response present that day, the response of an effusive, silly and unlasting faith. This response is represented in the woman at end of today’s passage who cries out concerning the blessedness of Jesus’ mother.

There is yet one final response, the response of those who truly believed that Jesus was the Messiah and whose belief was coupled with

obedience. This is the faith that sets the captive free.

In which camp do you find yourself this morning?

Does Jesus save, or does He not?