

OCULI / THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

Text: St. Luke 11:14-28

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Being obsessive-compulsive is not always a bad thing. During my years in the Air Force, I trained as a warrior. Nearly every moment of my career as a fighter aviator was spent with the single-minded purpose of knowing any potential enemy's strengths and weaknesses, such that, learning to exploit those weaknesses, I could turn them to my advantage, while avoiding the enemy's strengths, in order to destroy him.

Day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, for nearly 23 years of active duty, I constantly prepared myself for war. I read everything about war and tactics I could get my hands on. I constantly studied air combat tactics until I had memorized everything about my aircraft, its systems, and weapons, that I needed to know to survive so that when the day came to fight, I would not merely survive, but win.

I mention this, not so you think better of me, but as an illustration of the singlemindedness required to survive and win in a life-or-death struggle. In war, one cannot afford to rest on one's laurels; when that happens the war is already lost.

But not all wars leave bloody bodies on shattered battlefields, for not all wars are fought strictly by flesh and blood warriors. Not all wars can be seen with eyes of flesh and blood, but only with eyes of faith. You see, there is a war raging all around us. It is a spiritual war and the casualties of this war are beyond number. One could add up all the victims killed in all the wars in all the long history of creation and the count of souls lost could not begin to compare to those lost in the epic struggle between the hosts of heaven and the hordes of hell.

The war in which the Church of God is engaged is not a war against moral decay, nor inequality, nor injustice, social or otherwise. Those are only weapons of the enemy; evil to be sure. But our enemy, he who wields such evil and against whom we war, is Satan, the prince of death and darkness, along with all the principalities and all the powers of hell—all *“the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.”*

There are no bystanders in this war. In this war, there is no such thing as neutrality, and when it comes to victims, there is no so-called collateral damage—every victim is targeted with evil intent. Thus, there are no innocent civilians. One either fights for or against heaven. For he who is not with CHRIST is against Him and He who does not gather with Him, scatters.

Therefore, whether you are aware of it or not, whether you like it or not, you are warriors in this horrific struggle. You fight against a strong man and He has girded himself for the battle. He is fully armed and He, too, is obsessive-compulsive and fully intends to win the battle.

Every moment of his time is spent with a single-minded purpose: to destroy you. He is your greatest enemy and, on this earth, he has no equal.

Unfortunately, this strong man has an ally against you; someone you know only too well. This ally is there every time you fail—every time you fall. He knows your every weakness. He knows your secret sins and your illicit desires. He knows your greed and jealousy. He knows your lies. He knows your lusts and your vanity.

This ally knows what buttons to push and how to stroke and deceive you into betraying yourself. He knows all these things because the ally I speak of is none other than you in the sinful flesh of your Old Adam, who, though wounded by your faith, is still alive and well inside you. He collaborates with the enemy. He cooperates with the one you long to hate, but cannot quite get away from; the strong man—Satan.

Yet, there is One stronger than the strong man. He is older and wiser than the strong man. He carries no earthly weapons, for His strength lies in His weakness. His victory looks to all to be His defeat. He will be taken prisoner and led away as a Lamb to slaughter because to win this war, the Stronger Man must die. And die He will, suspended between heaven and earth, lifted up for all the world to see as demons dance and leap for joy, unseen around the foot of His Cross.

The strong man will vent all the violence, all the hatred, all the rage, he can muster against the Stronger Man while looking for a weakness that he can turn to his advantage. He will rally his troops and gather his allies and he will wage an unholy war against the Stronger Man, against whom will be fought the *“Mother of all Battles.”*

The Stronger Man will fight alone. He will be abandoned by His friends and countrymen. Heaven, with all the angels, will turn away from Him. Even His own FATHER will forsake Him. He will suffer abuse at the hands of His captors. They will humiliate Him and beat Him nearly to death. Satan and his allies will show the Stronger Man no mercy. Alone, He will be nailed to a tree and give up His SPIRIT and die.

Yet, we do not despair. This is nothing more than the *“finger of God”* who uses Satan as a tool for His own purpose. And God’s purpose is this: That the Stronger Man—JESUS—should suffer all the FATHER’s righteous wrath; that He should die to make payment for your sins. Therefore, the Stronger Man will allow the strong man to kill Him on a cruel instrument of torture and death—the Cross.

But there is an irony to Satan’s apparent victory; Satan does not understand that in killing JESUS he has actually engineered his own defeat. For JESUS, the Stronger Man, is stronger than the strong man; He is stronger than even death and the grave. Death could not keep Him, and the grave could not hold Him. JESUS lives, and in living, breaks our ungodly alliance with Satan and all his demons.

Yes, the war is won. The victory is complete. Yet, the enemy, in his rage, battles on. Like a mortally wounded serpent, he thrashes about still able to strike and inject the poison of sin deep into the flesh of mankind.

Therefore, to fight the battles of this life requires due diligence lest one becomes a casualty of the war. For the danger is to become like the Pharisees who grew too comfortable in their own merit and righteousness. Or it is to be like the hypocrites and schismatics who love to stand on the streetcorners making a great show of their faith.

They do not belong to God but are slaves to unclean spirits. They believe they are so pure and holy, that no evil could possibly assault them. They become comfortable and complacent and believe they are beyond the reach of Satan. They have convinced themselves that their race has been run and they have made it across the finish line. They claim that they are without sin but they have deceived themselves and the truth is not in them. Such have lost the fear of God!

Saint Peter writes in his second epistle, *“For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: ‘A dog returns to his own vomit,’ and, ‘a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire.’”*

Peter’s words, therefore, are in full agreement with those of our LORD; if the Kingdom of God is to come unto you, the devil must be driven completely out, for his kingdom is against God’s Kingdom. But the demon is not driven out by a demon, much less by the merit and righteousness of men, but by the SPIRIT and power of God alone.

St. Paul also writes: *“... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.... and be found in [CHRIST], not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in CHRIST, the righteousness which is from God by faith... “Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which CHRIST JESUS has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in CHRIST JESUS”*

Paul did not rest on his conversion alone. He knew the stakes were too high to trust in his own strength and merit. He had already tried that as a Pharisee. No, he believed and confessed just as do we, that we are saved by grace through faith alone, that CHRIST’s blood sacrifice purchased our salvation. Yet, he also knew that faith, when not exercised, when not strengthened by the Word and Sacraments of our Savior, could be corrupted and even die. He knew that when we thought we had trained enough our training had really only just begun.

A Christian is always penitent because a Christian knows that he or she is always a sinner. A Christian is always in need of conversion because he or she is always falling away. We are, as the sainted Dr. Martin Luther writes, *“simul iustus et peccator.”*

In this life we will always be simultaneously sinner and saint. We are saved, but we will always struggle with our sinfulness, or what theologians call concupiscence, that is, our inclination to sin. Therefore, we dare not rest on our laurels. Laurels are only awarded to the victors. No coach tells an athlete to stop running when the race is only half run, and never has a coach told an athlete to stop training before the race is won.

So, brothers and sisters in CHRIST, what are you to do? Repent! Stop living as if God did not matter and as if you matter most. Repent and believe that the Stronger Man has taken up residence in you. Repent and nurse at the breast of the Church, receiving there the pure Milk of the Word of God, which is the very Sword of the SPIRIT. Take up arms against the strong man and wield that Sword which is *“living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow...”*

Return daily to your Baptism. In Baptism, JESUS used the *“finger of God”* to trace the Name of God both upon your forehead and upon your heart. There, He cast out your mute demon and loosened your tongue so that you can sing His praises with all the angels, arch angels, and all the saints of heaven. JESUS cast out your demon to take up residence in your heart and with JESUS within you, there is no room for the one cast out to return.

In your Baptism, you are dressed in the *“whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.”* In Baptism, the mud and grime of battle against the old evil foe are washed away in a cleansing flood, and your tattered uniform of vile sin is replaced by the righteous garment of the Stronger Man, JESUS CHRIST.

Remember, too, when you are feeling weak and afraid, that JESUS CHRIST nourishes His army on His very Body and Blood which is the food for the soul. With His Flesh and Blood, JESUS refreshes and strengthens you against the onslaught of the devil and all his minions.

These are the weapons of a Christian, but they are not just any weapon for they were given by your LORD for service against the enemy.

Remember, too, that it is JESUS who fights for you. He is at your side upon the field of battle and will not desert you. JESUS is the Stronger Man who has laid down His life and taken it up again. Rally to the banner of the Cross of JESUS CHRIST where the war was won two millennia ago and hear CHRIST say, *“I forgive you all your sins.”*

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

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