



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Sunday March 23rd 2014 – Lent III

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

The passage selected for the Sermon this morning is taken from the Gospel:

“When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest, and finding none, he saith, I will return to my house whence I came out. And when he cometh, he findeth swept and garnished. Then goeth he and taketh seven spirits more Wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there, that the last state of the man is worse than the first.” St. Luke 11:24-26

It is the third Sunday of Lent. Saturday will mark the mid-point of the season. Either we have been successful in our resolutions of prayer and abstinence, and the real tug of our scorned addictions assails us every day, or we have not been able to keep our commitments and we face the temptation to just give up and try again next year. In either case, keeping our resolutions over the last half of Lent will be even more difficult than it has been so far. It is a good time to review why we dedicate this season to prayer and fasting so that we can fortify our commitment for the battle ahead.

Listen to the words of the demon that has been cast out. “I will return to my house.” My House. The devil considers our bodies and souls, our being, to be his house, the house of death, and pointlessness, and fear, and cruelty and sin and darkness. He owned it. The strong man came and cast him out by force. Jesus is the strong man, and He has taken possession of our being. He has made us temples of His Holy Spirit, so that we can “walk as children of Light, for the fruit of the Spirit is in goodness and righteousness and truth.” (Ephesians 5:8-9) He has replaced darkness with Light, sin by righteousness, cruelty by love, fear with hope, pointlessness with Holy purpose, and death by life.

But the devil wants us back. He wants his possession restored. He wants his house back under his control and dominion. He finds it swept and garnished, fortified with Light, Love, Life and the Holy Spirit, and realizes he cannot take it back by himself. He goes and gets seven other spirits and they lay siege. Of course, even fortified, these demons can not loose the grip of God. The devil cannot defeat God in open combat for our souls. Only we, ourselves, can accomplish that victory. The devil could not

overpower Adam and Eve in the Garden, and so he tempted and lured them into betraying God in their own pride and desire, and they cooperated with him. He still relies upon our weakness as he battles to reclaim his domain.

The desire of the devil is constant, and so are his tactics. He wants his home back. He appeals to our vanity, he preys on our weaknesses and addictions, he tempts us with immediate gratification, he cowers us by fear and despair, and he clouds our vision and understanding so that we can't see through the veil of death to our destiny of life. He wants to weaken us, to have us give in to the little sins and selfishness and pride so that we will be without resolve or reserve at the last when the great temptation to despair confronts us.

The popular knowledge tells us it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved. That is a lie. How much better never to have known what we are missing and what will be denied to us forever, than to have known our destiny and to have lost it. How much greater a burden and a punishment will hell be for those that have known the Light and Love of God, and yet have undone themselves. St. Paul tells us that no unclean person "has any inheritance in the kingdom of heaven. Let no man deceive you, for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience". We should fear that wrath. We should be committed to living in the Light, and to the chance to live forever by life in Jesus Christ.

By prayer and fasting we turn down the volume of the temptations of the devil. By self denial, we quiet the urgency of the need to respond to our addictions and desires. By other-centeredness, we close off the channels of self gratification that the devil uses to lure us from our defense. By tuning out the material world and tuning in to Scripture and Liturgy, we gain

the wisdom that comes from choosing to imitate Christ and to live with sacrifice in this time, so that we can live with Him in glory forever.

The Old Testament lesson for the day is taken from Deuteronomy. The Lord has just delivered the people of Israel from their bondage in Egypt. He gives them commandments and demands their allegiance and their faith. Along with the Ten Commandments, He gives them this explanation of why they must subject themselves to His authority, and deny their pride. "The Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that He might preserve us alive." (Deut. 6:24)

That is the purpose of Lent. To separate us from our inclination to invite the devil back into his old home. To quiet the noise of this world, so that we can hear the Word that the Lord has spoken to us. To build up our resolve, to face temptation, and remain strong in the Lord. To keep our souls and bodies as Temples of the Holy Spirit and to glorify God. To preserve the life we have been given. We have 26 days left until we commemorate the ultimate sacrifice made for our Salvation. Strengthen the walls of prayer and abstinence against the demon that had possessed us, and the cohort he has brought to lay siege with him against us to reclaim his home. We have 28 days left before we celebrate that Redemption. Let's commit ourselves to the season of self denial and prayerful preparation in anticipation of our participation by grace in the gift of eternal life.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen