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Pentecost 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Set Free”

Text: Luke 8:26-39; Galatians 3:23-4:7

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

It is dangerous to underestimate satan; but neither should we overestimate him. He is powerful, but not all-powerful. He is smart, but not all-knowing. He and his demons are legion, but they are not present everywhere. Satan is real, but he is not another god, equal to and opposite the true God, in an all out battle for this world. No. He is a creature, a fallen angel, and though he and his minions are active in this world and continue to rage and fight, they are no match for the Word of God. For the Word of God made flesh in Jesus, who has come not just to order them around, but to set us free from them by His death and resurrection. To win the victory once and for all.

That victory we are given a glimpse of in the Holy Gospel that we heard today. A man had been severely possessed by demons for a long time, but when Jesus arrives on the scene, the demons know the battle is over. They fall down before Jesus, they beg and plead with Him, and finally they are cast out - and the man, so long enslaved, is set free.

I often get asked the question why we don't see such demon possession like that today. Some people ask that thinking that because we don't see people like this today, these stories really aren't true, but come from the fanciful imaginations of a less cultured and more superstitious time than ours. These are people who underestimate satan.

There are a couple of answers to such a question. **First**, it is possible that while the Son of God was in the flesh and walking on this earth, there was a flurry of demonic activity and opposition to the work of God. That things like this happened at the time of Jesus *exactly because it was the time of Jesus*. That satan raged all the more with this invasion of God into his realm.

But a **second** answer could also be this: that satan will do whatever is effective for his cause, according to the time and place. And so if - like at the time of Jesus - making himself obvious and look powerful is the best way for him to pull people away from God, he will do so. However, if - like, perhaps, in our day and age - it is

more advantageous for him to be more subtle and make folks believe he doesn't really exist, and so we think we don't really need God or saving, then he will do that as well. In this regard, we could call satan the ultimate pragmatist - he will do whatever works.

But one trap we should not fall into is thinking that he is less active now than he was then. He certainly is not. He is still deceiving, still possessing people (although perhaps in more subtle ways), still enslaving them to sin. And still working on you and me. Not just to make you sin, but to rob you of your faith in Christ. To get you to fear, love, and trust in anything and anyone but your Saviour Jesus Christ.

Now, you might think, *I would never turn away from Christ!* I would never just stop believing in Him. And that, perhaps, is true. And so satan is not trying to get you stop believing cold turkey, but to slowly but surely substitute people and things for you to fear, love, and trust in more than God. To slowly but surely get you to compromise your beliefs. To slowly but surely lure you farther and farther away from Christ. And so maybe pleasing your spouse or fiancée becomes more important than pleasing God. Or maybe the approval of those around you at work or school becomes more important than standing up for the truth. Or maybe you cannot imagine life without certain things, so great your love for them. And how often has fear driven you to do what you know is wrong? Fear of losing a friend, fear that your past will be found out, fear that your plans for the future won't work out, fear that you won't have what you need. Fear is a powerful motivator.

And so instead of living in the freedom of Christ and His forgiveness, we live in the graveyards of past sins, in the shackles of regret and shame, among the tombs of anger and despair, and enslaved by fear. And so while we may look good and respectable on the outside, on the inside perhaps we look like that guy on the cover of your bulletin today! And not only us, but all people. Your family, your friends, your neighbors. How has satan been working in their lives? What fears and shackles enslave them? Satan never takes a holiday. Under good-looking skin may be a legion of demons.

But even a legion of demons is not enough for satan to keep a person enslaved when Jesus comes to him. When Jesus comes, as St. Paul told us today, to set us free from our slavery to sin and make us sons of God. When Jesus comes to set us free from the shackles of our pasts, from our shames, from our fears, from our regrets, from the sins that seek to rule over us, from our unbelief and doubt. To set us free from all that by forgiving our sins and by making us sons of God - not merely by adoption, but by *rebirth*. By being born again as a child of God in Christ Jesus. That whatever you were - **Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female** - you now have a new identity and status: son of God.

And so Jesus came, St. Paul says, *in the fullness of time*, or at just the right time, to set us free. Not by merely speaking a word and making our demons simply flee, but to break their grip on us once and for all. And so Jesus came not in glory, but in humility; not looking strong, but weak; not with legions of angels, but born of a virgin, to be our substitute, taking our place as a slave - under your sin, under the Law, under the cursed death of the cross - that His death and resurrection would set free all who are captive to sin and death. *And it has!* It has, for with His death and resurrection, Jesus has atoned for all your sin; stripped satan of his power and any claim he had on you; and broken the grip of the grave. And if your sin is atoned for and forgiven, and if satan has been defeated, and if the grave can no longer hold you - then you are free. You are no longer enslaved and shackled, but set free to live.

And so what happened among the tombs that day, in the country of the Gerasenes, gives us a glimpse of what Jesus accomplished for you in His death and resurrection, and what happens here in Holy Baptism. For with the Word and promise of Christ Jesus, this water is no mere water, but the water which becomes the tomb for your sins and death and demons - where they are forced to flee and are drowned, and you are raised to a new life in Christ, reborn as a son of God.

Which doesn't mean that satan will give up on you. In fact, he will redouble his efforts to avenge his defeat and being robbed of his prey. Of that you can be sure. So do not underestimate him, but also do not overestimate him, dear Christian! For though he continues to fight, he cannot win. For Jesus has not left, but continues to fight for us here. If we try to fight satan on our own, with our own strength, wisdom, will-power, or anything in us, we will surely lose.

So no, not us, but Jesus. Always Jesus. Only Jesus. His presence in His Word, in His forgiveness, and in His Body and Blood, continue the fight and continue to throw down satan and make him flee. If we neglect these, we are weak and satan is given room. And he doesn't need much room for that slimy body to slither in and make his home in you. But remembering your baptism, confessing and repenting of your unbelief and receiving your Saviour's forgiveness, and feasting on His Body and Blood given here for you, then you are strong. Strong in Him. Strong in His forgiveness. Strong with His Spirit. Strong with His life and salvation. And victorious.

Now, not surprisingly, the man formerly demon possessed wanted to stay with Jesus and go with Him. And many of us today as well would rather be with Jesus. Even St. Paul, too, wanted to depart and be with Jesus (Phil 1:23). For it would be easier, wouldn't it? To be free from the battles, free from temptations, free from the sorrows of this world . . . and be at home with Jesus. But Jesus left the man where he was, telling him to ***“declare how much God has done for you.”*** The powerful Word of

God would be spoken by this man formerly held captive.

And so it is with you. If you have not yet been taken out of this world to be with Jesus, then you have this privilege as well. To declare how much God has done for you. And know that through that Word that you speak, God will be working, continuing His work against satan, forcing demons to flee, and drawing people to Himself. For the Word of God from your mouth is living and active, filled with the Spirit, and powerful.

And you know why that's important? Because the new life of Christ can be a frightening thing. We heard that after Jesus set this man free, the people asked Him to depart! For they were afraid. . . . And we think: *Afraid of Jesus? Why would anyone be afraid of Jesus?* But many people have been taught that Jesus is mean and demanding. And many are comfortable with their lives and the way things are; comfortable in their sin, and fitting in with the ways of the world, and don't want to change, or be changed. It is like some slaves after the civil war. They had been set free, but a future freedom was frightening, and so they decided to stay slaves.

That's why you are so important. You who are the church, the body of Christ. You who have been set free. You who have been forgiven. You for whom God has done so much. Your Saviour has put you where you are and not taken you to be with Him, that His powerful, freeing Word be both lived and proclaimed by you to all the earth. And it is. And it will not stop as - here in the church, and out there as you take the church into the world - Jesus continues to free, to forgive, and to save. Doing for others what He has done for you.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.