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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Oculi (Third Sunday in Lent)

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Text: Luke 11:14–28

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The Christian life is beset with struggles against sin, our own as well as the sins of others, the allurements of the world, and yes, the devil and his fallen angels never give us a moment's peace. The writer of the book of Hebrews knew the doubts that God's people face on a daily, moment by moment basis. He was writing to first and early second-generation Christians. There was never a golden age of Christianity when the Christian Church wasn't contending for the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Listen to his admonition to struggling, discouraged Christians in Hebrews 12:1–4:

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. ³Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. ⁴In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

The author encouraged them to endure the long race of faith and obedience. They had not yet shed blood for the name of Jesus. The battle was hard, but the victory was assured. The best course of action, then and now, is to stay focused upon the Lord Jesus Christ. Look to Jesus with unflinching determination. He endured the cross. Rose from the dead. And now sits at the Father's right hand in glory and majesty. Look to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

Looking to God has always been the attitude of God's people. King David, in Psalm 25:15, part of today's Introit, wrote, "My eyes are ever toward the Lord, for he will pluck my feet out of the net." The eyes that David and the writers to the Hebrew Christians are referring to are the eyes of faith, not these wonderful creations of God by which we are able to see the physical world around us. Those eyes are the wrong organs of faith. The eyes of faith, which see the truth that permeates and transcends

the physical world, are created through hearing God's Word, believing it, and living according to it. The eyes of faith are created by hearing the Word of God with a true, sincere heart. Then you will be able to set your spiritual eyes toward the Lord Jesus Christ, the author and perfecter of your most precious faith. Right here at the beginning of this sermon I want you to hear the essential take-home message. True Christian faith and godly living begins, continues, and ends with hearing and believing God's Word. The Lord Jesus Himself declared, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Luke 11:28).

But the devil is a master at creating doubt about God's Word, the Bible in general, and the saving Gospel in particular. In fact, Satan's chief weapon against true Christian faith is doubt about God's Word. It all began in the Garden of Eden. Did God actually say that you may not eat of any tree in the Garden? (Gen. 3:1). Doubt. Satan tried something similar with Jesus during His wilderness fasting and temptation. According to Matthew's gospel, the devil said to Jesus twice, "*If you are the Son of God ...*" God the Father had Jesus to be His beloved Son when Jesus was baptized by John" (Matt. 3:17). But now, Satan is whispering, "*If you are the Son of God!!*" Doubt about God's Word! During the third temptation, Satan tried to get Jesus to doubt God the Father's will of saving the world through sufferings, death, and resurrection. Satan promised to give the world to Jesus in exchange for a single act of idolatry. This way is so much easier and simpler. Isn't it? Unlike Adam and Eve, Jesus resisted the devil's flaming barbs of doubt and held firmly to God's Word.

Even though Jesus defeated Satan during the wilderness temptation, he wasn't finished. The devil doesn't give up. He won't stop tempting us either. This is why daily prayer and regular periods of fasting are so very important, even as our Lord taught in the Sermon on the Mount.

The deep implantation of God's Word in your hearts coupled with regular prayer and fasting are the God-given means of resisting the devil's temptations. On one occasion, several of our Lord's disciples failed to cast out a demon from a boy (Matt. 17:14–21). When Jesus learned of their failure, the Lord cast out the demon and told the disciples, "If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you. Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting" (vs. 20–21).

I commend you all for being faithful in regular Church attendance. Encourage one another to come together for prayer and worship as the book of Hebrews teaches us.

And I also encourage you in daily prayer and regular periods of fasting, each according to your unique circumstances and abilities. The devil doesn't give up. And we must remain vigilant! God's Word keeps our eyes of faith open and sharp. Jesus said in John 16:33, "Take heart, I have overcome the world." And in Galatians 6:9, the apostle Paul wrote, "And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up." And James admonished Christ's Church, "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). Thanks be to God for the victory given to us in Christ Jesus our Lord. Through God's Word, our eyes of faith remain focused and strong.

Lest we think we can let down our guard against the devil's temptations, we should consider deeply the gospel text from Luke 11. Our Lord defeated a demon that had enslaved a man with muteness. When the man, who couldn't speak before began speaking, some marveled. Some doubted and scoffed saying, "He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, while others, to test him, kept seeking from him a sign from heaven" (vs. 15–16). Satan was stirring up more doubt!

The doubt comes in at least two ways: First, if Jesus did cast out a demon, He did so only by demonic powers. He's merely using demonic powers to deceive everyone; pretending to be from God, He's really from the devil, casting out demon by Beelzebul, the prince of demons. Second, even if Jesus did cast out a demon, we want more signs. Doubt, doubt, more doubt about who Jesus is, the Son of God in human flesh, doubt about what He came to do, deliver humanity from sin, death, and the deceptions of the devil.

Listen to our Lord's ingenious response to the devil's doubts. Vs. 17–18, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls. And if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebul" (vs. 17–18). In a war, spiritual or physical, the last thing you do is attack your allies who are helping you. It would be silly for Jesus to cast out a demon if he's working with the demons. In truth, this is the "finger of God" says Jesus. This is a reference to Exodus 8:19. Pharaoh's magicians recognized they were being defeated during the plagues. So they declared "This is the finger of God." It was the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses who was overcoming the kingdom of Satan. Notice Jesus uses God's Word, the Old Testament, to defeat the devil's doubt. And by so doing, Jesus overcomes the devil. Jesus says in vs. 21–22, "When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe; but when

one stronger than he attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his spoil” (vs. 22).

The Lord Jesus Christ is the Stronger One who plunders Satan’s kingdom. That is, Jesus attacks and conquers the devil and his evil hordes and rescues us poor, trapped sinners. Jesus plunders Satan’s kingdom and we Christian believers are set free!! We, the baptized, are the plunder Jesus has collected for Himself through His death and resurrection. Jesus would not leave us in misery and death. He Himself is our deliverer, the Stronger One, who keep us safely in the palms of His hands. Thanks be to God for His indescribable gifts!!

So here at the end we return back to where we began. The struggles of the Christian life will not go away because you came to Church today. They didn’t for the Hebrew Christians of the 1st century, they won’t for us in the 21st century. We must recognize and understand this. It’s what God’s Word teaches us. So why come to Church? To be strengthened and renewed in the grace and mercy and love of Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. He remains faithful to us especially when we struggle. He is the One who powerfully invites us to come to Him, “Come unto Me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). And your Church, your brothers and sisters in arms, also stands with you and for you. Look around and see with the eyes of faith! We are the body of Christ. Though the battle remains long and weary, the victory remains ours. By coming together to hear His Word and receive His Sacrament in the manner in which He commands, our eyes of faith are opened and strengthened. Blessed, says Jesus, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it (vs. 28). The take-home point is our Christian life begins, continues, and ends through hearing God’s Word. Blessed are you dear saints. Keep your eyes ever fixed toward the Lord Jesus Christ, the author and perfecter of your faith.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.