

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent | 2026
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The Gospel Lesson for the Third Sunday in Lent draws us into a decisive confrontation. For three weeks now, we have watched Christ advance against the demonic powers. In the wilderness, the tempter spoke boldly and authoritatively, only to be silenced by the Word of God. In the region of Tyre and Sidon, a demon grievously vexed a young girl, yet fled at Jesus' command through the persevering faith of her mother. Again and again in the Gospels, the demons recognize who Jesus is. They may resist; they may rage; they may beg, but they always obey. Before Him, they are rendered silent, impotent, and exiled. Through signs of healing and exorcism, Christ reveals that He has come to deliver His people from captivity to the powers and principalities of the world.

In this morning's Gospel, the demon is mute. It departs quietly. But the silence it leaves behind does not last. Other voices rush in to fill it. The crowd begins to speak, first with curiosity, then with suspicion, then with accusation. The miracle of deliverance is met not with gratitude but with murmuring. Some claim that Jesus casts out demons by Beelzebub; others demand yet another sign from heaven. St. Luke's language suggests that their inquiring is not the honest search of faith seeking confidence and understanding, but rather the restless skepticism of unbelief—a search that is all but pre-determined never to find. In their endless demand for proof, the crowd assumes the very posture of the devil in the wilderness, who earlier in the Gospel tested Jesus under the auspices of proving that He really is the Son of God.

Our Lord answers this murmuring with clarity and authority: "If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand?" Their accusation is absurd. But the absurdity of it reveals something deeper than their affliction from the powers and principalities. Their captivity is not just an outward problem, but an inward one, as well. In the wake of His signs, those who stand before Jesus are faced with a more obvious and more costly alternative than that He is a magician harnessing the spirits—that He acts by the finger of God, that He is the Lord of the Spirits, and that in His works the Kingdom of God has come upon them. If that is true, then only one real response remains: repentance, submission, and worship. And it is precisely this response that the murmuring heart resists.

That resistance had run like a dark thread through the whole history of Israel. The name "Israel" itself means "the one who struggles with God." In their own wilderness wanderings, freshly delivered from Egypt, God's people longed for the familiarity of bondage rather than the uncertainty of freedom under His rule. They murmured against Moses; they balked at the commandments; they preferred the gods they knew to the living God whose character they did not yet trust. So it was in first-century Judea. After exile, invasion, and Roman occupation, the status quo—even one marked by taxation, disease, and demonic oppression—could feel safer

than surrender to a Messiah who would overturn every false security, but also require the total self-surrender of body and soul.

Yet this ancient temptation to murmur and doubt is not confined to any one age. It is the temptation, stamped upon our nature since the trespass in Eden; as David Benner names it, it is the desire to be God without God. We bristle at the thought of a power we cannot master, a Lord to whom we must bend the knee. Egypt, Babylon, Rome—king, president, party—it matters little how we construct the attempt to be our own gods. In all of these expressions, what we resist most deeply is the loss of our unconditional independence. And when faced with the fact of our creatureliness, a skeptical whisper begins: perhaps this Jesus is not who He seems. What begins today with a resentful doubt will, in a few weeks' time, become our cries of "Crucify Him!"

St. Paul knew this temptation intimately. As a Pharisee, zealous for the law and for the fragile stability of the Judeans, he had participated in that same doubting resistance. He had been so devoted to defending God that he persecuted the Son of God. In his own life, legalism became a refined form of pious self-rule—a way of pleasing God without needing God. Yet on the road to Damascus, the risen Christ met him in blinding glory. In that light, all Paul's self-fashioned righteousness was exposed as the darkness it was. Blinded outwardly, he began at last to see the truth. "Awake, you who sleep," he writes, "and arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light." As he knew too well, what is revealed by Christ the light either becomes light or recedes into a deeper darkness.

Today, we arrive at the heart of Lent. This season is not a self-improvement project, nor a spiritual strategy for strengthening our independence. It is the merciful exposure of whatever in us would rather murmur than submit, test rather than trust, and rule rather than be ruled. Christ drives out what afflicts us, loosens us from habitual sin, and liberates us from bondage. But there is no such thing as a neutral heart. There is no spiritual vacuum that holds for long. If darkness departs, the place must be filled with light. As our Lord reveals, the removal of darkness is not yet salvation. The soul must be occupied by its true resident, who is Christ. The well-swept room must be adorned to welcome Him. Either God will reign in this His temple, or some false usurper will: be it the world, the flesh, the devil, or perhaps the subtler tyrant of our own insatiable ego.

As is so often the case in the Gospels, the women understand it first: "Blessed is your mother!" It is an instinctively right response to the works of God. Jesus receives her words and carries them further: "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it." That is the dividing line. The demons hear and obey unwillingly. The murmuring crowd hears and resists. The blessed hear and keep—receiving (like Mary) the Word with a joyful heart and bearing its fruit with patience. To hear and keep the Word is to walk in love after the pattern of Christ. It is the life of God in us. It is the light that drives out shadows. The devil's way is accusation, provocation, consumption, and destruction; it seeks its own good and forsakes both God and

neighbor. The way of Christ is sacrifice, communion, and gift. A soul filled with such love is not easily occupied by darkness.

The middle of the Lenten journey is often the most difficult. Having tasted some freedom, we may be tempted to compromise, to enjoy that freedom while quietly reclaiming our lives as our own. We may attempt to leverage our deliverance for a more refined return to former captivities. But the only way is forward. The things from which Christ has freed us will never satisfy us again as they once seemed to. We have seen the light; they cannot appear as bright. And if we return to serve them, they will bind us more cruelly than before, they will lead us into a more blinding darkness.

Our Lord is going up to Jerusalem to die and to rise in triumph over sin and death. He calls us to follow Him, bearing our crosses, walking in His light, abiding in His love. The battle may intensify; the voices of darkness may grow louder. But we do not fight alone. We walk as a people, encouraging and supporting one another, keeping close to Christ. The enemy may stalk in the outer darkness, but he cannot snatch away those who remain in the light. As we move deeper into Lent, let us not look back. Let us hear the Word of God and keep it. Let us receive Christ this morning so that the cleansed chambers of the heart may be filled with the living God. As Jesus said: “Blessed indeed are they who hear the word of God, and keep it.”