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The Gospel of Luke
XXXVIII. But If By the Finger of God . . .
Luke 11:14-28

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One day, as Jesus was making His way to Jerusalem, He stopped to heal a man possessed by a demon which had made him mute. Jesus cast out the demon with little fanfare – in fact, this is one of the shortest accounts of a miracle we will find anywhere in the Bible: *“There was this mute man, Jesus drove out the demon, the end.”* Except, of course, it’s not the end of Luke’s account of what happened that day. In fact, it is what happened next, in response to this healing, which forms the bulk of Luke’s account. Basically what happens after this healing is that there are three different responses to the healing, from three different groups within the crowd of witnesses. And Jesus then, in turn, speaks to each of these three responses, each of these three groups. And therein we find the meaning of this healing story for us.

Group number one in the crowd – response number one: *“But some of them said, ‘He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons’ . . .”* Beelzebul is just one of the names we find in the Bible for the “prince of demons” – but it’s one of my favorites, because it is so delightfully derogatory and disrespectful. Beelzebub is another form of this name, which is often translated as “Baal” (the pagan god of the Philistines) plus the word for “flies.” It’s likely where William Golding got the title for his novel, The Lord of the Flies. Beelzebul, on the other hand, is “Baal” (false god) plus that which, out in the field, flies like to swarm around!

Which fits the response Jesus then makes to this first group and their reaction. They accuse Him of casting out demons through the authority and power of the prince of demons. Jesus replies that this argument is one of the dumbest His critics and opponents (think scribes and Pharisees) have come up with yet in trying to discredit Him before the people: *“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?”* But it’s what Jesus says next which is the most important part of His reply – He turns the tables and really puts the scribes and Pharisees on the spot with this. He says that there are only two possible interpretations of His power to cast out demons. Either, as His opponents have now suggested, He does so by the prince of demons. Or He must be doing so by the power of the one true God. Those are the only two options to explain Jesus’ power. And since option A is ridiculously dumb, it can only be option B – by the power of God.

And then Jesus presses home His point. He says to His opponents: *“But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.”* In other words, if the only possible explanation for how Jesus can cast out demons is through the power of God, then that fact means, contrary to what His opponents are asserting, that Jesus Himself has

been sent from God, that Jesus is a true prophet of God – and, more than that, that Jesus actually is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that in His presence on earth the Kingdom of God, everything God had promised to Abraham and to Israel, is beginning to come to pass through Him and right before their very eyes. Jesus is warning His opponents that they are in danger, not only in finding themselves on the wrong side of history, but that they are in danger of placing themselves on the wrong side of God!

But it's what Jesus says next that speaks most clearly to you and to me – making the assumption that none of us here this morning are actively and deliberately seeking to be the enemies of God. Jesus speaks of a strong man being overcome by an even stronger man. It is a reference to what Jesus will do through His death, closely tied to that most puzzling of phrases in the Apostles' Creed, that Jesus "*descended into hell.*" Part of what the Church has intended by that phrase is that during His time in the grave, Jesus went down to Beelzebul's stronghold and defeated him once and for all – the stronger man defeating the strong man – and, thereby, setting free the prisoners kept in hell by their sin and death, once and for all. In other words, sin, death, and the devil – that unholy trinity – is no match for the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In His crucifixion and death, Jesus defeated the forces of darkness which hold us in bondage. And in His resurrection, Jesus sets us free to live the new and eternal life which belongs to the Kingdom of God.

And all of this is suggested also by Jesus statement that "*if by the finger of God.*" I love that expression and what it suggests to us. To us, the forces of sin, death, and the devil seem powerful, temptation being so very hard for us to resist in our own lives. And, to us, the world still seems to be so much in the grip of that darkness. But our God is so powerful, so in control of His creation and His plan of salvation, that all He has to do is raise one single finger and sin, death, and the devil are no more. To quote Martin Luther, who wrote a whole hymn to express just this assurance:

*A mighty fortress is our God,
A bulwark never failing . . .
And though this world, with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim,
We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
For lo! his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.¹*

To say it again, that phrase "*the finger of God*" is a powerful reassurance for us – that if you and I are in the hands of God, then we have nothing to fear. Because in the end, God wins. And, in the end, our all-powerful and loving God shall move His finger and make all things new.

Group number two – the second response to Jesus' casting out of the demon from the man who was mute. If the first group were the enemies of Jesus, then we might classify this second

group as the fence-sitters in relation to Jesus. They're not against Jesus, but they're not really for Him either – at least, not in the sense of being willing to commit their lives to Him, to commit to living their lives in accordance with His Word. This is the group which Luke describes as those who *“to test him, kept seeking from him a sign from heaven.”* I mean, what more do they need? Jesus has fed five thousand with a few loaves and even fewer fish. He has healed every manner of illness – even raised the dead. And they have just seen Him casting out a demon. What further evidence do they require, before they are willing to get off the fence and commit themselves to believing in Jesus and following after Jesus?

So we can understand the rather uncompromising tone of Jesus' response to this second group. To the fence-sitters, the uncommitted, the “keeping my options open, spiritual but not religious” crowd, Jesus says: *“Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.”* In other words, there is no middle ground, there is no fence to sit on in the struggle of our souls, for our souls. We are either with Jesus, committed to Him body and mind and spirit – or we are not only not with Jesus, but we have also made ourselves His enemies by our indifference. It's precisely the point He makes also in the parable which follows – about the person cleansed of an unclean spirit, but then not filling up that space with the Holy Spirit, and the evil spirits come back worse than ever. No middle ground, no fence to sit on – we either have Jesus in our heart of hearts, or we have that which is not Jesus in our heart of hearts.

What does this mean for us? I think the application is rather obvious, but I want to come at it from a slightly sideways direction. Thursday morning, as I was eating breakfast I was thinking about this sermon, which I was shortly to write – Thursday is sermon writing day. Now, admittedly, I had a migraine – and that may have affected my thought process – but what popped into my head as I was thinking about this part of the sermon was a phrase, an acronym actually, which has become somewhat popular these days: YOLO. Y.O.L.O – you only live once. Now YOLO is not actually new on the stage of world thought. Long before YOLO, the Romans had *“carpe diem”* – seize the day. And I thought also about some lines from the Elizabethan poet Robert Herrick (this was probably the migraine-affected part of my thinking): *“Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, / Old Time is still a-flying; / And this same flower that smiles today / Tomorrow will be dying.”* Of course, it was not actually rose buds he was interested in – but it fits the theme of you only live once, seize the day, because Old Time really is still a-flying by.

But the interesting thing is how short-term our YOLO-related thinking usually is. It usually translates into some immediate pursuit, some immediate search for pleasure and excitement – rather than making us stop, step back, and take a longer view, to look at the big picture of our life journey as a whole on this earth. In our hands, YOLO usually turns out to mean something like go skydiving while your heart can still handle the thrill; or buy that new car before inflation drives up the prices; or, in my case, go ahead and have a second piece of that delicious cake Joan Groome always makes for me on my birthday. But rarely does YOLO translate into asking the bigger questions, examining the greater goals, finding the larger perspective on what our lives are really for – what we are really here to do, what we ultimately want our lives to be about. YOLO – therefore, to what greater purpose and end shall we live our time on this earth?

Which is where Jesus' response to the fence-sitters speaks to us – to remind us that while the immediate pleasures and pursuits raised by YOLO can be fun and rewarding, it's the bigger

questions raised by the truth that we only live once which matter far more, and which call for far more of our attention. The Bible tells us that we were created by God and for God – and that true human satisfaction, true human fulfillment, a truly human existence filled with joy is found only in giving our lives back to the One who gave them to us. “*Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.*” When all is said and done, on that day when we can YOLO no more – what do we want our lives to have been all about? What will we present to God on that day when we stand before Him?

John Ortberg, Presbyterian pastor and wonderful writer on the Christian life, offers us a YOLO thought experiment along these lines:

Imagine that your life is over, and you are led to a small room. There are two chairs in the room, one for you and one for God (who gets a very large chair), and there's a VCR. God puts a tape into the machine. It has your name on it and is labeled What Might Have Been.

Imagine watching all that God might have done with your life if you had let him.

Imagine seeing what he might have done with your financial resources if you had trusted him to be generous. Imagine seeing what he might have done with your giftedness if you had trusted him enough to be daring. Imagine what he might have done in your relationships if you had trusted him enough to be fully truthful and fully loving. Imagine what he might have done with your character, if you had dared to confess sin, acknowledge temptation, and pursue growth.

I don't know that God will make any of us watch a video like that. I do know that if I think too much about how far I fall short of what might have been, it can become defeating and that unrealized potential can become a club I beat myself over the head with.

But I also know that I want my life to come as close as I can to realizing the goodness God intended for it. I know this is my only chance, and I know I want to minimize the gap between what shall be and what might have been as much as I can. I know that as long as I'm living, it's not too late – because I have this day. I know I want to ask God for commands, not guarantees, because when God commands, he enables . . . And I know that one day it will have been worth it.

. . . He has wonderful things in store for those who steward his treasure wisely.²

YOLO, I hear Jesus saying to the fence-sitters, and to you and me. “*Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.*” To live by, with, and for Jesus is to live the life for which we were created and in which we find our true contentment and deepest joy. To live by, with, and for anything which is not Jesus – is to waste our lives.

Which brings us to the third group, the third response from the crowd in response to Jesus' healing of the man possessed by muteness. This is the group described as marveling at what Jesus has done in healing this man. And by marveling, read also rejoicing, being awe-struck, being filled with hope and praise by this demonstration that God really is working out His salvation purpose in this world. In other words, this is the response of those who do belong to Jesus. We hear this group also in the woman who, after all has taken place, calls out to Jesus, "*Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts at which you nursed!*" She is exclaiming her joy in Jesus, which has come from tasting the Lord and discovering that He is good. From having taken His yoke upon her and discovered that indeed therein is found rest for our souls. It is the joy which springs forth once we have committed ourselves to Him fully – and so discovered, in the process, that He really is as good as His promises. That He truly is our Good Shepherd, our Lord, our Savior, and our divine Friend.

But it is what Jesus says to the woman in response which really seals the deal: "*Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!*" Now, we can take that as an admonition to study the Word and obey it – and that is never a wrong reading. But we should also attend to how Jesus begins that statement – "*Blessed!*" Those who belong to Him; those who trust in His little finger power of victory over sin, death, and the devil; those who have found in Him the ground and goal of their being – are blessed.

Blessed – meaning filled with His joy, anointed with His peace, upheld with His power, carried along by the hope He establishes. And meaning, above all else, filled to overflowing with His love. "*Blessed rather are those who know the word of God and keep it!*" And blessed not just in that kingdom to come, but blessed even right now in the peace and power of the kingdom which has already come among us through the presence, through the grace, of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

¹ Martin Luther, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

² John Ortberg, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), pp. 47-48.