Lent 3 (2026)

Colorful characters abound at St. Luke's. They always have.

One from the church's early years was Carl Rudolf Berghult II, better known as Rudy. Born in 1905, he died at the ripe old age of 94, two months into the new millennium.

He and his wife Eve lived in a large two-story clapboard house with a cupola up top. It is located just up the hill from the building with the rounded front, off East First Street. The name Rudy gave their property was "Friendly Mount."

In his former life, Rudy had been mayor of Duluth, Minn., and had many stories to tell from that period of his life. The one I am reminded of this morning concerns a mysterious pain in his back. He went to a number of doctors, and none

could find the source of this pain. They were baffled.

Finally, a Christian, perhaps someone at his church, pinpointed the source of his problem: he had a demon oppressing him, resulting from him having dabbled in spiritualism.

Through some sort of Christian intervention, the demon was cast out, and he never had that pain again.

The story may sound strange – it sounded strange to me at the time. Nevertheless, I have no reason to doubt it.

I begin this morning with Rudy's story because it parallels the one recorded in today's Gospel. Both men suffered at the hand of a demon, with the latter being rendered unable to speak. And, in the end both were healed.

Today, we don't usually go around talking about demons. If you did, you might well find people looking at you with suspicion!

There was, however, no such reticence in the ancient world where demon possession was taken for granted. The Jews themselves had exorcists to deal with these pests. Some of the incantations used were believed to have gone back to King Solomon.

We might be tempted to dismiss all this as nothing more than silly superstition. And just perhaps today, with the aid of modern science, we could give better explanations to some things that happened in the world of antiquity.

But let's not press this type of thinking too far. If we do, we might well fall into the trap of what C.S. Lewis called "chronological snobbery", which he defined as:

“The uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited.”

In other words, **the newer is always the truer.**

Thirty or more years ago, I read a book by Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a respected British minister of the Gospel and a medical doctor.

In this book, he told about seeing cases very similar to those described in the Bible in places where the Gospel had not had much exposure.

He went on to say that as Christian influence in the West receded, this phenomenon found in Third World countries seemed to be on the rise in Britain. He was writing in the early ‘60s.

But Lloyd-Jones was no extremist. He went on to say that, while such things as demon

oppression and possession do exist, the practitioner, whether medical or clerical, needed to be very cautious in assigning this diagnosis.

Back now to this morning's Gospel. Here we find Jesus coming face to face with the 'underworld of evil' and beginning to do battle with it.

The healing of the man unable to speak should be viewed as more than a one-off display of divine power. Rather it should be seen as a sign that the long-awaited Kingdom of God was breaking in.

Satan's stronghold, which included disease and death, was being assaulted and overcome.

On the cross the decisive blow would be given, and on Easter morning, death itself would begin to recede backward as Jesus came out of the tomb.

A stronger than the strong man had come to the rescue of Adam's fallen race.

There is no doubt a number of lessons we can learn from this passage of scripture. I want to focus on two this morning. The first is the **peril of dismissing the devil and his dominions as myths from a superstitious past**.

Recent revelations about the brutality and oppression of people in Iran at the hands of their own rulers give the lie to such naive thinking.

It is chilling to hear reports of women who spoke out against repressive Islamic regulations being subjected to satanic brutality.

In a Feb. 27 webinar hosted by the Kennedy School's Institute of Politics and Carr-Ryan Center for Human Rights, Jared Genser, an international human rights lawyer, described the premeditated and systematic massacre of

20,000–30,000 civilians over two nights in January, including families and children.

If the devil and his minions did not exist, they would have to be invented to make sense of what we see going on in the world.

What should our response be to these fallen angels in our personal lives? ///

I would want to argue that that response should not be one of **pre-occupation**, but **vigilance**. Speaking of this appropriate vigilance, Paul in Ephesians 6:11-12 writes:

"Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places."

I never shall forget advice given by Dr. Leslie Archer, former university physician at the University of the South at Sewanee, when speaking at this church.

Imagine, he said, walking along a roadway through a grove of trees with overhanging branches. On either side, lurking in the shadows, are dark, grotesque figures bent on your destruction.

But up ahead, where the grove of trees ends, the light of the sun can be seen streaming in.

Our task as Christians, he said, is never to forget that a real and formidable enemy is out there, but to keep our eyes focused on the light, which is Christ.

So, the first lesson we can draw from today's passage has to do with the peril of dismissing the devil as a relic of a bygone era, of not taking him seriously.

You don't want to make him your primary focus. Nor – I might add – use him to evade personal responsibility . . . "The devil made me do it. Ha ha!" That type of thinking doesn't make the grade.

But you do need to take his power seriously. You need to stay on guard. You need to know how to recognize his lies and deceptions.

Ultimately the way you stay out of danger – moving now to the metaphor Jesus uses at the end of today's passage – you have to have your house – the house of your body – filled with the Holy Spirit.

A second lesson or application involves another peril. This peril is the peril of unnecessary division, splitting apart.

Jesus says famously in today's passage that a house divided against itself cannot stand.

Here He was responding to the Jewish religious leaders who said that He cast out demons by the power of Beelzebub, the prince of the demons. ('Beelzebub', by the way, means Lord of the Flies or of the dung hill).

This claim was absurd, as Jesus shows it to be in his response: **"Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and a house divided against a house falleth."**

This saying is true in a broader sense.

I'm thinking about divisions among Christians. These divisions weaken the witness of Jesus' followers to those outside the fold of salvation. It may, in some cases, cause the demise of a congregation or whole denomination.

Let me hasten to say that there <u>are</u> times when division is not only permissible but required.

If, for example, you find yourself in a church where Jesus is said not to be the Son of God or one where what God affirms is discounted and what God forbids is celebrated, well sure, it's time to cut ties. These are Gospel, first order, matters.

But many divisions which take place in churches are over secondary issues, issues which have nothing to do with the Gospel.

An extreme example can be found on the highway leading to Dawsonville out of Ellijay. There are two churches of the same denomination over the road from each other.

How come? Well, because 60 or 70 years ago, one group wanted to continue to have services twice a month, while another group wanted to meet every Sunday . . . or at least that is what I have been told.

A house divided is a weakened house at best. So, let our focus remain on Jesus, the Gospel and service for one another.

A little hymn from the ‘70s perhaps says it best:

We are one in the bond of love . . . Let us join our hands That the world may know We are one in the bond of love.

Today’s passage admittedly contains some strange bits – a spirit that makes a man speechless and a story about spirits taking over an empty house.

But it is also filled with practical truths, chiefly: the importance of not discounting the underworld of evil and standing together in a world riddled with division. Real religion is practical. This is about as practical as it gets. Let’s be one in the bond of love.