

Sermon 4-19-26
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Entering The Fourth Quarter

Last year we looked at the greatest contest ever played in this creation. For three full quarters of the game Messiah Jesus was on the field, playing against Satan and his horde. Satan desperately tried to get Jesus — the second Adam — to fall for the tricks he had used on the first Adam. He tried to make the man Jesus grasp at equality with God by rewriting the life-script of Messiah that had been carefully embedded over the centuries in Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.

It took Satan only one try to overcome Adam and have him grasp at equality with God unto catastrophic results for the human race. On the other hand, Satan tried at least 10 times to deceive Jesus, the second Adam, but failed miserably. For Jesus did not run away from suffering and death on a cross. Rather He became obedient to the Father unto death, even death on a cross. And for this, God highly exalted Jesus. Jesus was resurrected from the dead in the first immortal human body. He was given the Name above every name, so that every knee in heaven, on earth and under the earth has to bow and declare that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

With this victory Jesus won the entire game after three quarters. But there was and is a fourth quarter. Jesus went to the bench. He ascended into heaven. And there He will remain until the right time comes and He comes off the bench, returning to earth as the victorious King of kings and the head of the human race. And with Jesus' return the game will end. Winners and losers will be declared. The losing team of rebellious sinners — of all kinds, angels and humans — will be sent off into the Lake of Fire. While the winners will be gathered by the King of righteousness into the righteousness He gained for them on the cross.

From the beginning of His earthly ministry, Jesus gathered disciples around Him who were devoted to Him — both men and women. From these, Jesus chose an inner core of twelve men to be His witnesses. He chose this same group to be His apostles — the ones He would send out into the world to proclaim the Holy Gospel.

The twelve went everywhere with Jesus. He even commissioned them at one point to do what He was doing: to preach that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, heal the sick and drive out demons. Jesus taught these men extensively from Scripture.

However, a time came in the last year of Jesus' ministry when He began to teach His disciples something they were not prepared for — the Suffering Messiah. Even though it's plainly written in the Old Testament that the true Messiah will suffer and die for the people of earth, the twelve could not believe it. For, all their lives, Jesus' disciples had been taught by their rabbis to expect only a Victorious Messiah, not a Messiah who would have to suffer in order to become victorious.

Therefore, immediately after Jesus' crucifixion, it appeared that the band of twelve Jesus had commissioned as His apostles were woefully unprepared to take the field as Jesus

prepared to go to the bench. One of them — Judas — betrayed Jesus, then committed suicide. Another — Peter — denied Jesus three times. All of them scattered on the night Jesus was arrested, except for John and Peter. On Easter Sunday, many locked themselves into a large room in terror of persecution.

As we know, in the first light of Easter Sunday, some women of the group went out to the tomb where Jesus' body had been laid, to anoint His body. Suddenly, an earthquake disturbed the opening day. When the women arrived at the tomb, they found it open, with its stone rolled back, the guards laying like dead men in front of it and an angel or two sitting on the stone. The angels invited the women to look in the tomb and see that Jesus' body was not there. They declared to the women that Jesus was resurrected from the dead and that they should go tell the men. The women didn't know quite what to think. For instance, all Mary Magdalene could think was that someone had stolen Jesus' body — that was until she encountered the resurrected Jesus. Later, Peter and John ran out to the tomb and found it empty as the women had said. They discovered the burial cloths deflated like a balloon with no body inside. But they didn't know what to think.

On Easter afternoon, two disciples decided to leave Jerusalem for the nearby village of Emmaus. As we just read in the Gospel lesson, the resurrected Jesus disguised Himself and walked with these two. As an antidote to their despair, Jesus taught these two men that He had fulfilled everything that Moses the Prophets and the Psalms prophesy about a Messiah who must suffer in order to gain victory. But they just couldn't get it that Messiah had to die and on the third day be resurrected from the dead. When Jesus finally revealed Himself then disappeared, these two ran back to Jerusalem in the gathering dark.

For the last two Sundays, we've looked at what happened that night in the Upper Room. The place was all abuzz with the stories of those who had seen Jesus resurrected from the dead when suddenly Jesus stood bodily in their midst — even though the doors were locked. After those gathered in the room got over their shock and accepted what their senses were telling them, Jesus again launched into a huge Old Testament study on the suffering and victorious Messiah. It's summarized for us in Luke's gospel. And then something enormously important happened. We read from John 20:21-22, "21 Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.' 22 And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" We also read from Luke 24:45-47, "45 Then he [Jesus] opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, 46 and said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, 47 and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.'"

And with Holy Spirit breathed on them and their minds opened to the Word of God, just like that, these people were given much of what they needed to take the field for the fourth quarter. There would come another infilling of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost that would give them the courage and boldness they needed to preach Jesus to Jerusalem. More infillings with Lord Holy Spirit would come to give them the courage and boldness they needed to preach Jesus to the world.

But the difference was Lord Holy Spirit. He turned these people from sniveling cowards, woefully unprepared to take the field, into a team that is still winning through suffering. Thus, the prophecy John the Baptist had made about Jesus was fulfilled. As we read in Luke 3:16-17, "16 John answered them all, saying, 'I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will

baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

There it is. Jesus came to baptize His Church with the Holy Spirit and with the fire of zeal. So, in the forty days that elapsed between Jesus’ resurrection day and His ascension day, His apostles and disciples were powerfully strengthened by Lord Holy Spirit. Everything Jesus had ever taught them suddenly made sense. In the succeeding ten days they began to discover for themselves in God’s Word what Jesus had accomplished on the field of battle for them. In this way, Lord Holy Spirit within them intensely prepared them to take the field to continue the struggle and complete the fourth quarter.

For Satan was and is a defeated foe. But his resources were and are still great. As always, he is always able to deceive the unwary and inexperienced. Deception is his main tool. But when that fails, he is able to exploit the Original Sin that still exists in the heart of even the strongest believer. And should that fail, Satan has minions of human slaves that will come against the believer with threats of violence and actual violence.

The original apostles and disciples had to navigate all this. They could not escape suffering and even death. But, they had the power of the cross on their side. They had Jesus’ assurance that their Original Sin and their old natures had died on the cross with Him. They had Jesus’ assurance that through His resurrection, they were already gifted with a new nature of righteousness that they would fully receive in the Kingdom of God. And, most importantly, through the cross and the empty tomb, Jesus gave them assurance that real forgiveness of sins from God had been won for them. Also, Jesus gave them the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion by which the all-powerful forgiveness of sins Jesus had won could be distributed among them and to the world. And overarching everything, they had Holy Spirit’s gift of saving faith by which all these historical events and divine promises could be believed as real and active.

What was the initial result? In today’s first lesson from the Acts of the Apostles we read the very end of Peter’s very first sermon. Acts 2:36, “[Peter proclaimed] ‘Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.’” It was the first sermon ever preached on the suffering and victorious Messiah. It was a powerful and highly skilled sermon that pulled in Messianic prophecies from Psalm 16 and Psalm 110. So, from where did Peter, the fisherman, get not only the knowledge and skill to preach such a powerful, sophisticated sermon, but also the courage to preach it? This was a demonstration of Yahweh’s power. Peter, the man who had denied Jesus three times under pressure had been forgiven and had been chosen to preach. This was Yahweh’s power displayed through human weakness and inadequacy. This was a display of Lord Holy Spirit’s power.

And there’s more. In the book of Acts, Peter preached before the Sanhedrin twice. Both times they resisted in anger and threats. Later the Deacon, Stephen, preached to the Sanhedrin and was stoned to death. The Jewish leadership absolutely could not receive the glorious message of the Gospel. On the other hand, the average Jew on the street miraculously did receive the Gospel. For as we read in Acts 2:37, “Now when they [the crowd] heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’” Only Lord Holy Spirit can produce a heart cry of agony like that out of a crowd — the cry of sinners who know they have sinned and know they are

doomed unless they repent. What shall we do? What can we do to remedy this? Is there any remedy?

Of course, in Jesus there is. Acts 2:38-39, “38 And Peter said to them, ‘Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.’”

Now verse 40 tells us, Acts 2:40, “And with many other words he [Peter] bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, ‘Save yourselves from this crooked generation.’” So this sermon went on as a strong exhortation that could be summarized with the words, “save yourselves from this crooked generation.” And that’s the same thing that needs to be said to every generation, including us. Don’t fall for the devil’s deceptions and traps, like so many are doing today! There is a way out of eternal death into eternal, righteous life! Jesus is that Way!

Now, because Peter preached this sermon on Pentecost, the historic Jewish festival of the firstfruits of the harvest, there was a huge firstfruits harvest of souls that day. We read in Acts 2:41, “So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.” That must have been a tremendous day. And it was all because of Lord Holy Spirit.

In the coming weeks we’re going to speak a fair amount about Lord Holy Spirit. The first thing we have to understand is that Lord Holy Spirit doesn’t work in a vacuum. He caused Holy Scripture to be written. Jesus commissioned His apostles to proclaim that Holy Scripture. And when the apostles proclaimed Scripture, Lord Holy Spirit then had something to work with. And He worked wonders. Thus, on the Day of Pentecost 3,000 believed what they had heard.

But that wasn’t the end of it by any means. The apostles commissioned elders and bishops in every congregation they established. These elders and bishops were the first congregational pastors. And ever since, every generation of church leaders has commissioned new leaders out of the subsequent generations to keep Christ’s Church on the playing field until He returns. This is so Lord Holy Spirit has something to powerfully work with, namely the Word of God.

And so the Word of God has come to us. The reason we hold service here is very simple. The reason I stand in this pulpit every week is not to entertain or impress anyone. It’s to give Lord Holy Spirit something to work with — in you and in me, for that matter. No one can believe what they haven’t heard about Yahweh, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. No one can see or enter the Kingdom of God unless they have been born again — convinced of the reality of Jesus and of real life in Messiah Jesus. And that doesn’t happen without the Word of God, read and preached. That’s why we do this week after week. And every time God’s Word is read or proclaimed here, that gives Lord Holy Spirit opportunity to work in you — and in me. For, remember. This life is not the main event in life. Eternal resurrected life is the main event. And that’s what Lord Holy Spirit draws us to and prepares us for by His Word. And when preparation for eternal resurrected righteous life spills over into this world, it changes even our existence here for the better. That’s what the three thousand found out in the days after Pentecost. It was and is all because Lord Holy Spirit cements home the Word of God in hearts.

So, today I end with an important concept found in the Word. What is a temple? From ancient times humans built magnificent buildings for their many gods to dwell in. In the

same way, Yahweh Himself, commanded Moses to make a movable tent temple which He would inhabit. Then, in the time of King Solomon and again after the Babylonian exile, great stone work temples were built in Jerusalem as the place of Yahweh's abode.

However, something happened when Jesus came to earth. As we saw back in Lent, Jesus announced it this way to the Samaritan woman He talked with at Jacob's well. John 4:21, 23-24, "21 Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain [the temple in Samaria] nor in Jerusalem [the temple in Jerusalem] will you worship the Father. . . . 23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.'" True to Jesus' word neither temple exists today. But, still, a temple for the living God does exist. Do you know where it is? Let's find out.

Lord Holy Spirit tells us through the Apostle Paul in 1Corinthians 3:16-17, "16 Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? 17 If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple." This means that if we have been baptized into Jesus Christ, Yahweh — our only Creator God — has claimed our very bodies for His own as a dwelling place — His temple — for His Holy Spirit. The implications of this are enormous. And we're going to go down that path in the coming weeks.

But today, it is sufficient that you and I hear God announce something that we may not have known or may have ignored. He has claimed us as His very own holy temple — His dwelling place on earth. And God's claim on us plays a huge role in how His Church plays the fourth quarter on to victory in the cross of Jesus Christ. We most definitely need to know what Jesus' plan for His team is. And that only comes by Holy Spirit produced faith in God's Word. Our bodies are living temples of the living God. That's what the Word says. May we all begin to believe this Word. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the ESV.