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Isaiah 42:13

THE SON OF GOD GOES FORTH TO WAR: THE PROMISED WARRIOR

INI

What do you think of war? When I was six years old, I thought that it was pretty cool. I lived in a neighborhood with a lot of boys. Most of our fathers had served our country during World War II. We played war, shooting imaginary Nazis. No one ever got hurt. It was all make-believe. By the time I was sixteen, I saw things differently. Vietnam was ramping up. Some of the older boys were drafted. Some went off to war. Some never returned. One of the most popular television shows in the seventies was called MASH. It was a comedy, but it didn't portray war as something fun. People got killed. Mothers lost their sons, wives lost their husbands, and lives were changed forever. War is not fun. War is not pretty. But sometimes war is necessary.

We know that war is sometimes necessary because there are always evil men. They don't merely try to take people's things. They try to take people's countries and freedom. They have to be stopped. You can hope for peace, but in many cases, you can't negotiate that peace. You couldn't sit down with Adolph Hitler and tell him that it wasn't right to take Poland or France or Belgium or other countries and he'd say, "Oh, I'm sorry!" and give them back. You had to go to war and defeat Nazi Germany.

Our Lenten series this year is about war, a necessary war. It was a war against evil, a war that we could not win on our own. The casualties numbered in the billions. This war started a long time ago. It was horrendous and would be won by one person dying on a cross, saving the world from the axis powers of sin, death and Satan. It would be won by our Lord Jesus Christ. We see that THE SON OF GOD GOES FORTH TO WAR. He is THE PROMISED WARRIOR.

The prophet Isaiah spoke about this warrior many years before. He says: "The LORD will march out like a champion, like a warrior he will stir up his zeal; with a shout he will raise the battle cry and will triumph over his enemies." In Isaiah's day (2700 years ago), God's people had already been expecting the warrior for thousands of years. Shortly after Creation, Satan attacked Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They lost the battle. Sin and death came into our perfect world and we were in big trouble! Yet immediately after that lost battle, God promised that he would send a warrior who would defeat Satan and return peace to the world. He promised: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."

The conflict that God had predicted was not going to be pretty. It was not going to be a discussion. It would not be a negotiated settlement. It would be a huge, bloody struggle between Satan and the warrior who would be descended from Eve. Satan would go down, violently defeated. There would be waiting, thousands of years, before the time was right. The population of the world would grow, and so would unbelief and evil. God would send his representatives and prophets to warn the people, but most would not listen. Troubles would get worse.

You know the reason for that, don't you? It is something deep inside of us. It is a disease called sin. You were born with it. You got it from your parents and passed it on to your children and grandchildren. No medical procedures can remove it. No surgeon's knife can cut it out. No drug can remove it. Not radiation can burn it out. There are other things that come with it: Satan, a corrupt, evil world, and finally, death. There is no peace treaty with this enemy. A war must be waged so that it can be wiped out. Isaiah reminds us that war clouds are on the horizon.

Today is Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. We are reminded of our helplessness and our mortality. The traditional words for the imposition of ashes state: "Remember, O man, that you are dust, and to dust you will return." We know our sin and our sinfulness. We know what lurks in our hearts: greed, lust, anger, hatred, envy, jealousy, discontent, ingratitude, and much more. We know how that sinful condition has led us to commit many sins of thought, word, and deed. We have sinned against God and we have sinned against our fellow man. We have sinned knowingly, and we have sinned unaware. We have sinned as children, and we have sinned as adults. Sometimes we try to fight it, and sometimes we give in to our sinful impulses. God's Law demands nothing less than total perfection and we can't achieve it. We are fighting not against flesh and blood, but against Satan, the world and our own sinful flesh. We are not going to win that war. We are weak; we are weary; we are worn, we are helpless. As we take an honest look at our own lives, we say with the Apostle Paul: "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that I subject to death?"

We aren't going to do it, but God could, and he did. God gives us hope. More than that, God gives us a champion who will march out. Isaiah spoke many times in his prophecy of who that champion will be. He would be born of a virgin. He would be a world ruler. He would bring justice to the nations. His deep, battle wounds would result in our ultimate healing. Isaiah didn't know when he would come, but he was certain of this: He would come. He would come when the time was right for God, for the world, for you and me. 2000 years ago, he came!

He came in all humility. He was born in a stable in a little town called Bethlehem. He grew up in an insignificant village called Nazareth. He learned the trade of a carpenter. He looked just like any other man. But he was a warrior, and what a warrior! He wasn't huge with bulging muscles like Goliath. He wasn't a weakling who knelt in fear and cringed before his enemies. He was the very Son of God. Who do you think threw Satan out of heaven? As Joshua was near Jericho, and the walls were about to fall, who was that man "Standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand?" Who single-handedly struck down 185,000 Assyrian soldiers who were about to attack Jerusalem? The Lord of hosts in the Old Testament was the preincarnate Christ. He is not a wimp; he is a warrior and a winner! He loves the people he has created, and he came to save them.

He is someone so strong that he can willingly allow others to take him captive. This was after he had knocked them to the ground to show the power of his divine Word. He would allow them to beat him, whip him, and nail him to a cross. This was all part of God's plan of salvation for the human race. He endured it all, knowing that he could stop it at any time. He was the one who brought the universe into existence simply by saying, "Let there be!" If he wanted, he could have sent twelve legions of angels to prevent all these things. The Jewish leaders and the Roman soldiers could not kill him. Only he could willingly give up his life, and he did so that he could destroy all our enemies.

There have been many famous warriors over the ages: the samurai, the ninja, Navy seals, and others. None of them could hold a candle to this warrior because none of them possessed what he had inside him. He didn't need body armor or weapons. He was just like us, but with one important difference. He was without sin. He was pure and holy. He was righteous and good. He was our substitute. He never sinned, not once. Never did he have an impure thought, a cross word, or improper action. Even in battle, his only motive was love, pure love for both friend and foe alike. You know his name. That name pointed to his purpose. He would be given the name Jesus because he would save his people from their sins.

Our promised warrior would come with a unique battle cry. He would not speak it as he entered the battle, but rather after the battle had been fought. You've heard that battle cry every Good Friday. "It is finished!" Everything had been completed. His work was accomplished. Our sin was paid for, completely. Nothing more would ever need to be

done as far as our salvation was concerned. We are clothed with the very righteousness of Christ. His victory is our victory. Isaiah would say it like this: "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

Let there be no doubt that Jesus Christ, the promised warrior came and won the war for our souls. It wasn't easy. It came with great pain and it cost him his life. But the one who laid down that life would also take it up again and we will celebrate it on a Sunday seven weeks from now. That is the great news. He has conquered sin, and hell, and even death itself.

Ash Wednesday is indeed a day that we see our sin. We grieve over what we have thought, said, and done. And we should! But we walk away tonight, knowing that our guilt has been taken away. God no longer sees our sins. He reminds us of our baptism as our sins were washed away and we were received back into God's family. We receive Holy Absolution as God speaks to us and assures us of that forgiveness. We go to the supper that Jesus instituted, where he gives us his very body and blood to personally assure us individually that our sins are forgiven.

And then, we go out into the world, back to our families and our jobs and our lives, knowing what God has done for us. We forgive others, as Christ has forgiven us. We thank the promised warrior who did what we could not do. We rejoice and say with King David of old: "In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety." AMEN.

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John 11:33-37

THE SON OF GOD GOES FORTH TO WAR: THE HIDDEN WARRIOR

INI

Back when I was in college, a number of us went to Milwaukee to watch the Bucks play the Detroit Pistons. We got to the game early and were walking around the arena. I saw a man sitting in the stands, and he looked so tall. Then he got up and I was amazed at how large he really was. It was Wilt Chamberlain, all 7'4" of him. He was huge. He would be playing the next night with the Los Angeles Lakers. You really couldn't hide Wilt. There have been other warriors that are less conspicuous. We have probably all seen them in everyday life. Many of them are probably living in nursing homes now. They fought for our country during World War II and Korea. Some were recipients of medals for bravery. They saved many lives, but you wouldn't know it. They were hidden warriors.

During the Lenten season, we are looking at the Son of God who goes forth to war. This war would change the whole world. But Jesus did not look like a warrior. If you saw him on the street, you would not gasp at his height or bulging muscles. He looked just like anyone else. You could say that he was A HIDDEN WARRIOR!

Jesus was just like us in many ways. The Scriptures tell us the he got tired, hungry and thirsty. When he was a child, he grew up just like any other child. "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man."

There was one difference and it was a big one. He had no sinful nature. He was completely without sin. Just think about what that must have been like for his parents. We know how frustrated we become with our children at times. They talk back and sass and refuse to do what we ask. They demand to get their own way. Jesus was always respectful and obedient. Mary and Joseph never had to give him a time out or a spanking or send him to his room.

St. Peter tells us that we were redeemed from sin, death, and the power of Satan "with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect." He continues, "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." For us, that is unbelievable. We can't imagine such a thing. Sin clings to everything we do, every day. We can't live a perfect, sinless life. But Jesus could, and did! He was the perfect sacrifice. There has never been a human being like Jesus. You couldn't tell that he was sinless by looking at him, but he was!

You would have seen that he was different. Every year Jesus went to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. As a twelve-year-old, he went with his family just as he always had. Jesus showed that he had come for the upcoming battle. He looked just like any other twelve-year-old boy as he discussed Scriptural matters with the rabbis, but his words gave evidence that he was much more than an average boy. They would see the hidden side of Jesus.

Sometimes you could see his power as he performed miraculous signs. On one occasion Jesus arrived in Bethany at the home of friends: Lazarus, and his sisters Mary and Martha. Lazarus had died and had been buried for four days. Mary, understandably, was crying. "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. 'Where have you laid him?' he asked. 'Come and see, Lord,' they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!'"

We have the shortest verse in the Bible. "Jesus wept!" It tells us so much about him. These weren't fake tears like an actor could emote. They were real. His friend Lazarus had died. He knew the impact the death had on his sisters and friends. Jesus had spent time with the family. They had eaten together, laughed together, and now cried together. Jesus felt their pain.

You know what that is like, don't you? We go through it so many times in our lives. We lose our grandparents, mother, father, best friends, even our children. We feel the pain even when we lose a dog. We cry not only on the day of death and the funeral, but other times in the months and years ahead. We cry on birthdays, anniversaries, Thanksgiving and Christmas. We cry sometimes when we look at pictures or hear a song on the radio. Tears are natural. We cared and loved that person. And Jesus does as well!

We shed other tears. We think about how we have hurt other people, including the people we love the most by thoughtless things we have said and done. We didn't think about what we said. Sometimes we didn't even care. We wanted to hurt them. We were totally selfish. There are many times we cannot undo what we did. We look back upon our lives and weep. And we should! But Jesus came for our sins!

People at Bethany were wondering: "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" Jesus shed tears because of the damage sin had done. Death was not part of God's plan for this world. It was introduced by Satan. We hate it. And the people hated it as well. Everyone was talking about Jesus' recent miracle of giving sight to a blind man. Why didn't Jesus use some of that power to heal Lazarus? Martha wondered the same thing.

They all knew that there was something special about Jesus. We know his power. He brought the universe into existence. Whether you go big with looking at trillions of galaxies or whether you go small looking at the atomic structure of things or you look at all the different species of animals or consider the human brain or many other things, you think of the unlimited creativity, brilliance, and power to make these things happen. Nothing was by accident.

St. Paul write: "Christ Jesus, who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness." Jesus is the very Son of God. He is not 50% man and 50% God. He is unique. He is 100% man and 100% God. Martin Luther said that trying to understand this was like trying to illumine the sun with a candle.

That is what we can't understand. The eternal Son of God became a man born in time. He always had his divine nature, but now he added a human nature to his perfect, almighty self. He became one of us. We call that the incarnation. He would humble himself and become not only a human being, but the lowliest of servants. He emptied himself. He set aside the divine glory and power that he had as God. But there were rays of his divine power that would show forth at times.

And this was one of the times! He told Martha that she would see the glory of God. You know the rest of the story. Jesus walked out to the grave and in a loud voice said, "Lazarus, come out!" And Lazarus came out! Jesus showed his power. Death had to yield to the one who gives life. Jesus was getting ready for the final battle that would take place just a short time later.

We know the damage that Satan has done to our lives and to the lives of everyone around us. He wants nothing more than to see us feel weak and helpless. He wants to take away our faith and lead us all to hell with him. He is more than any one of us can handle, alone or collectively. But we have the perfect Son of God who comes as the perfect

sacrifice for our sins. If Jesus was only a perfect human, his life would only count for himself, but since he is the Son of God, his sacrifice could count for every man, woman, and child in this world. His holy, precious blood is the very blood of God. His sacrifice was perfect and complete for every one of us.

Jesus called Lazarus his friend. He calls us his friends as well. He said, "No greater love has one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." That is what Jesus did on the cross, so that you and I might have forgiveness and life. He has brought us into his family through the washing of water and the Word in Holy Baptism. He has promised to be with us always as we go through the trials and temptations of this world. He is there for us, always!

We continue to struggle. Maybe our pain is physical. Maybe it is emotional. We struggle with fears and doubts. Sometimes God seems so far away. We pray, but it seems as though he is not listening. We read the Bible, but it doesn't seem to speak to you. It seems as though he were hiding. But he is hiding in plain sight in his Word and sacraments.

We know that Satan is always there, like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. But remember this: "The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world." Jesus is more powerful than Satan. He controls the universe with one hand while his other hand is wrapped around you. We can't see it with our physical eyes, but we can see it through the eyes of faith. Jesus will bring us safely to our heavenly home. You matter to him. He cares about you!

He fights for us every day. He makes all things in our lives work for our good, even if we can't see his purpose at the time. He listens to every prayer we speak. He has assigned his holy angels to watch over us as spiritual battles are waged for our souls.

Jesus cared about Lazarus. And he cares about you and me as well. The cross proves it. He would lay down his life so that you might live and live eternally. He's got the whole world in his hands, and he has you in his hands as well. You are in the hands of a mighty warrior. Trust him! AMEN.

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Hebrews 4:15
THE SON OF GOD GOES FORTH TO WAR: SKIRMISHES

INI

Have you ever heard of the term “captology?” Maybe you have, maybe you haven’t, but you probably have seen how it works. It is a technology designed “to change people’s beliefs and behaviors.” If you use your computer to any degree, you will see exactly how it works. Social media uses it to get people to divulge their personal information. You may not give out your social security number, credit card numbers, and other important things, at least I hope not. These people learn about you anyway. You may click a website that offers vacation homes. You might be intrigued by one or another. Suddenly two weeks later, those homes show up on your computer as ads. They want you to take another look at them and think, “Maybe, I should rent this place!” Somehow people know that I have a beagle. It is amazing how many websites pop up showing me beagle t-shirts, jewelry, and quilts. It is all by design. The computer programmers understand human behavior very well. They want to manipulate our behavior, and often succeed!

This is nothing new. It has been going on for centuries. Satan has done his work very well on the human race. He knows our sinful nature and how to manipulate it. He is sneaky and stealthy. He uses lies and half-truths, whatever it takes. He wants to hurt us and turn us against God. You know how he succeeded with our first parents and you know how he has succeeded with you time and time again. He had an even bigger target in mind. That was our Lord Jesus. If Satan could have gotten Jesus to fail, there would be absolutely no hope for us. Satan would not win, even once. Tonight, we look at SKIRMISHES.

Satan made many attacks upon Jesus, but he never won. Jesus always overcame his attacks. The writer to the Hebrews tells us: “We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are-yet he did not sin.”

We know what Satan’s temptations are like, don’t we? We can look back on our lives and see many stupid things that we did. We wonder what we were thinking. Jesus faced them all. The Scriptures tell us much about Jesus’ life; there is also much we don’t know. He would begin his public ministry at the age of thirty. What happened in those years before that? Jesus would be the perfect Lamb of God. He would resist all of Satan’s temptations.

Have you ever thought about that? Think back to when you were a child or a teenager. Didn’t you face Satan’s temptations? Didn’t you listen to him and find yourself in big trouble? Do you think Jesus didn’t face the temptation of not listening to Mary and Joseph when it came to washing the dishes or cleaning up the carpenter’s shop? If Jesus was perfect and refused to sin, don’t you think that the other children mocked him unmercifully? Don’t you think that there were many children who didn’t want to hang around Jesus, because he was too goody-goody? Do you remember what it was like going through puberty? Do you remember what it was like when you were in your early twenties and the temptations you faced then? Jesus would face all those things. And he would resist those temptations.

When Jesus was baptized, the Father spoke of his beloved Son, with whom the Father was well-pleased. That tells us that Jesus had resisted all the temptations of Satan up to that point. Now Satan would ramp things up, and that was how the Father and Jesus wanted it to be. Jesus would be led out into the wilderness for forty days. He would go without food for that time. He would be at his weakest human point. He would be weak and weary. Satan would

confidently attack the Son of God. Imagine Satan trying to act as though he were your friend, smiling all the time, and waiting for the right time to strike!

Remember that all of Satan's temptations are a variation of the very first one that he used on Adam and Eve: "Did God really say?" He would try to get Jesus to doubt what the Father had said. The first temptation simply asked Jesus to turn stones into bread. Could he really trust that he was the Son of God? Could he really trust that the Father would provide for him in the wilderness? Jesus would resist him saying, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

The second temptation turns things around, trying to make Jesus show a false trust in the Father by throwing himself down from the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem, trusting that the angels would protect him. He answered that one from Scripture as well: "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Finally, Satan appealed to the fleshly desires we all have. He tried to flatter Jesus, enticing him with all the power, wealth, and glory this world has to offer. Jesus wouldn't have to suffer and die. He could take his kingdom now. Wealth and glory sounded so much better than suffering. Jesus responded: "Worship the Lord your God and serve him only."

Jesus answered all the temptations of Satan with the words of Scripture. They are true and they are powerful, more powerful than the devil. Jesus would win this skirmish with Satan, but there would be more skirmishes on the horizon. Satan would sometimes work directly and other times he would enlist others. He would enlist two men who served as high priests of Israel: Annas and Caiphas. The high priests were to represent God before the people and the people before God. These men did neither. They were only concerned about power and wealth. They wanted Jesus out of the way!

Jesus was the ultimate High Priest. He would represent the people before God, and he would represent God before the people. The High Priest would also offer up sacrifices. Jesus would not only offer up the sacrifice, he was the sacrifice. He would offer himself for the sin of the world on the cross.

Jesus knows our weaknesses. He experienced every kind of temptation. He saw how weak, sinful people could lose those battles. What are the battles you fight? What temptations are you struggling with? What is your most vulnerable spot? In a national religious survey on temptation, people said that they struggled most with worry. We see that all the time. Do I have enough money? Is my job secure? Will I be able to retire comfortably? Should I invest in the stock market? Will I catch the coronavirus?

They struggle with self-control. We eat too much. We drink too much. We spend too much. We spend too much time on social media. We struggle with lust. It's hard to turn our eyes away from sexy movies, television shows, magazines and other media. We might even be tempted to view pornography. We struggle with lying. It seems so easy. We don't want to be caught, so we simply lie and lie again to cover it up. Amazingly, when asked why they gave into temptation, a few said that they enjoyed it, but most said that they really didn't know why.

I know that I struggle with many of the things on that list. You may as well. We all have our weak points. You know them and Satan knows them as well. Like captology, these things will keep popping up in our lives at some very unexpected times. Imagine if there were a brain scanner that visibly showed what we were thinking to others. Wouldn't that be a horrible thing? Imagine other people seeing your thoughts. None of us would want that to happen.

Just think about our time in church. Do you ever let your mind wander during the sermon or other times? Do you just drift off into other things? You start thinking about paying bills or what's on television or how many days to vacation or fill in the blank. Do you wonder whether we already prayed the Lord's Prayer or confessed the Creed? Do you wonder what verse of the hymn we are on or what the hymn even said? Yes, that happens to all of us as well. And that is exactly what Satan wants to see. He wants to do anything to distract us, to take our focus off God's Word and his promises. We are weak and we fall over and over again. But Jesus did not fail.

Every minute of his life on earth, Jesus kept the Ten Commandments perfectly, in his thoughts, his words, and in his actions. He loved the Lord God with all his heart, soul, strength, and mind. He loved his neighbor as himself. He was a human being just like us, but he was without sin. He faced the same temptations that we do yet resisted every one of them. Throughout his entire life, Jesus remained pure!

"My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work." Jesus was always in contact with his heavenly Father. We see him engrossed in prayer, talking with his Father at every opportunity. Jesus didn't come to earth to engage in some sort of game or exercise, wondering if he could keep his own commandments as God and man. He came because we could not resist Satan's temptations. The Bible shows us some pretty great men. We call them saints: people like Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, Peter, John, Paul, and others. But all of them were also sinners. The Bible shows us their flaws and sins. None of them could represent us. God demands perfect obedience.

The perfect obedience we needed could only be found in one man and one man alone, the man who was also God. His perfect obedience could and did count for all people. He would take our sins to the cross and we would be covered with his perfect righteousness.

We struggle, we fight, we agonize as we try to be perfect and faithful. We fail the test over and over again. We have lost many skirmishes. When we see that Jesus was perfectly faithful every second of his life, we see how great the battle really was.

Jesus knows what you are going through. He knows the struggles you face. Just as Satan knows your weaknesses, Jesus knows them as well. He is there for you. "We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin." Jesus was there. He was forsaken. He was lied about. He was hurt by the words and actions of others, even his friends. He is not some uncaring thing out there in the universe. He is one of us. He knows us and he cares. He has lived the life we could not live. He has taken all our sins to the cross and nailed them there forever. We are forgiven. Thanks be to our High Priest! AMEN.

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Ephesians 6:12

THE SON OF GOD GOES FORTH TO WAR: RECONNAISSANCE REPORT: KNOW YOUR ENEMY

INI

When sports teams are about to face each other, they try to be prepared. They will have scouts in the stands when that team is playing another team. They will watch what that team tends to do. They will look for the strengths and hopefully weaknesses of that team. They will see what formations the team will line up in and what that team does in that formation. You will look to come up for a defense against certain plays because hopefully, you know what is coming. You want to prepare as well as you can. You will watch videos and discuss with your staff and players what to expect. Anyone who does not prepare is foolish.

On the spiritual plane, we have to know our enemy. Sadly, most of the people in this world are totally unprepared. They don't even know who the enemy is. We face a powerful enemy. He is the prince of darkness. He is invisible. We can't physically see him with our eyes. He is evil. He wants to kill you, utterly destroy you. Left alone, we are totally helpless. St. Paul writes: "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual powers of evil in the heavenly realms."

That should send chills down our spine. We're not talking about some imaginary enemy, but rather one who is real and as dangerous as it can possibly get. Satan, the devil, is not some cartoon character out there with a red costume, tail, and pitchfork. He is a spirit. He was one of the angels that God created. Many have thought that he was an archangel, one of the most prominent angels. Like man, the angels had free will. Satan did not want to serve God. He wanted to be God. It is thought that pride was his original sin. The Scriptures tell us that pride goes before destruction. Satan rebelled against God. Other angels joined him in his rebellion. They were cast out of heaven, out of the presence of God. God prepared a place called hell for Satan and his demons to inhabit.

The word Satan means "enemy." He is the enemy of God and the enemy of God's people. Like an army, he and his demons are organized. They have a plan to try to destroy you. They want you cringing in fear, thinking that there is no hope. As we face the coronavirus and all the ramifications, both short-term and long-term, they are doing a very good job. They want you to think that God has abandoned you. Forget about all the promises that God gives us in his Word. They will tell you that you cannot trust God. Once again, we go back to that very first temptation: "Did God really say?"

Satan has often been called the Prince of Darkness. Darkness is the absence of light. When we are in darkness, we are gripped by fear, afraid to take even a single step, not knowing what is out there. Know your enemy! Know what he is trying to do with you and your family and your friends and the rest of the world!

Satan is indeed powerful. He is more powerful than we. He is able to do great things. But Satan is not more powerful than God. He is not almighty. He is not omniscient. He is not omnipresent. God is all those things and more. Satan has already been cast out of heaven. But he is still there until the Final Judgment. St. Peter reminds us: "Be sober, be vigilant. Your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour." We've all seen lions at the zoo. They are in cages. There are moats separating the lions from the visitors. The lions may roar as loudly as

they can, but they can't hurt you, unless you are stupid enough to jump over the moat or enter the cage of that lion. Then you have only yourself to blame for the consequences!

We must know the enemy and what he plans to do. At times, Satan is very smart and crafty. At other times, he is not very smart at all. He could not prevent God from accomplishing his plan of salvation as our Lord Jesus would go to the cross with the sin of the world upon him. On the one hand, he would try to prevent Jesus from doing that. On the other hand, he would try to work through Judas and Caiphas and Pontius Pilate and others to do that very thing that would bring us salvation and the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

He is a liar. We've all been lied to. We've all lied to others. When a person is caught lying, we have a hard time trusting that person. Jesus told the unbelieving Jews the truth about their plans to kill him: "You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies." Jesus knew Satan well. He knew the enemy. Jesus came to defeat that enemy.

If you live in the United States, your native language is English. If you live in Spain or Mexico, your native language is Spanish. If you live in Germany, your native language is German. You use that language, every day, all the time. Satan's native language is lying. He uses it all the time, every day. All he wants to do is to hurt, to kill, to destroy. The name devil means "slanderer." He is angry and Jealous of what Jesus has done. He wants us to be ignorant of that. I have not heard of any run on Bibles during this time of crisis. My phone has not been ringing off the hook with people of our community asking for devotional materials or what books of the Bible that they should be reading. We can have all the hand sanitizer and toilet paper in the world, but without Christ, that won't do us any good.

As I've told you many times before, Satan is very predictable. He will use two very effective lies. The first one is that you are such a good person that you don't need Jesus for anything. You are much better than others. You try to be nice to your spouse, your children, and others. That has to count for something. Even though you never had any time for God and his Word, you are better than most. The second lie is just the opposite. He will tell you that you are such a great sinner that God will never forgive you. Many people will not go to church because they have been convinced that there is no hope for them. You've done too many great and terrible sins and you are consumed by guilt. He wants you to be angry with God. He wants you to despair. He wants you to abandon God's Word so that you are in total darkness.

That is why the Son of God went forth to war. He came to destroy the works of the devil. He came to expose Satan's lies. He came to defeat him with truth and light. We have light in the church this evening. Light always defeats darkness. Even in a large dark cave, a single candle or flashlight will help. We have a greater light than that. We have the very light of the world. It is a much greater light than the sun. St. John writes in his Gospel: "In Jesus was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." John writes later in his Revelation: "There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign forever and ever."

Darkness has not overcome the Son of God. Jesus faced Satan many times and there was only one winner. We know who it was and is and ever will be. It is our Lord Jesus! In the Star Wars movies, Luke Skywalker defeated Darth Vader in a battle of light sabers. In real life, Jesus and Satan both used the cross as their weapon. Satan thought that he had beaten Jesus as the Son of God lay dead on Good Friday afternoon. His body was laid in a grave and sealed tight with a stone. But Jesus had given the promise that he would rise again and rise he would! The cross was the ultimate weapon that would defeat all our enemies: sin, death, Satan and our own sinful flesh. Satan is defeated, eternally, but like a terrorist who is cornered, he wants to kill as many others as he can.

We have been given the wonderful gift of faith. We can see Jesus for who he really is. Even though he looked like any other human being, he was the very Son of God. We always look beyond Good Friday to Easter, knowing that Jesus would accomplish everything that the Father sent him to do and everything that he said he would do. Jesus is truth. Truth always defeats lies. Light always defeats darkness.

We would not go into a dark cave without some kind of light: a flashlight, a lantern, a torch. That would be foolish. The brighter the light, the better off we are. Why would we want to stumble around in the darkness of this world without the light of our Lord Jesus Christ? That would be even more foolish. This past Sunday, we looked at the story of the man who was born blind. Jesus gave him the gift of physical sight. Even more importantly, he gave him the gift of spiritual sight. He could clearly see who Jesus was. He would be continually questioned by those who hated Jesus and he kept saying the same thing: "One thing I know. I was blind, but now I see!"

Do you see it? Do you see your sins that would take our Lord Jesus to the cross? Do you see how many times you listened to Satan's lies? Do you see the total inability you have to resist all of Satan's temptations? Have you ever been gripped by fear or despair, thinking that God would never forgive a sinner like you? We know that the sins we commit most often are the sins that affect us personally. Whether those sins are greed, fear, doubt, envy, jealousy, lust, anger, selfishness, discontent, lying, or many more, Satan will try to get us to commit those sins. If he can't get us to fall, he will try to get us to despair. Know the enemy and the tactics he uses!

Know your Savior! Know who he is and know what he did for you, for me, and for the world. Know that he came into this world for you. Know that he lived for you. Know that he died for you. Know that he paid the price for your sin by his holy, precious blood, and by his innocent suffering and death. Know that he rose for you, destroying the power of sin, death, and Satan. Know that he has a place prepared and reserved for you in heaven. Know that there is a world out there where so many people do not know these things. Pray that God uses you to bring light and truth to others so that they may see the hope that we have.

Know the enemy and his lies! Know the Savior and his truth! AMEN.

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John 6:66-68

THE SON OF GOD GOES FORTH TO WAR: THE WARRIOR REJECTED BY MANY FOLLOWERS

INI

I have been privileged to officiate at many weddings. I think of all the time and planning that couples put into their big day. Everyone was happy as they said their vows and exchanged rings and had a big celebration with all their family and friends. They promised to love one another and respect one another and cherish one another, in good times and bad, in sickness and health, in poverty and wealth, until death parted them.

I would love to say that all the couples that I married are living happily ever after. You know that I can't say that. No pastor can. Sadly, sin shows its ugliness all the time. What did it take to break up a couple? How many disagreements and arguments? Did someone just get disgusted over the other's habits? Was there abuse by alcohol and drugs? Was there unfaithfulness? Was it verbal or physical abuse? What causes the "Wow" to turn to "Ugh"? There are many times I've cried when I heard of marriages breaking up.

And there are many other times that I have cried as well. I have confirmed many young adults who at one time in their lives stood before the church and confessed that Jesus was the most important thing in their lives and they were willing to suffer anything, even death, rather than fall away from him. Some left him after many years. Some left after they went to college. Some didn't even bother to pick up their confirmation picture. The same thing happened during our Lord's ministry. This evening we see THE WARRIOR REJECTED BY MANY FOLLOWERS.

This was the turning point of Jesus' ministry. For two years the crowds kept growing. Jesus was the one that everyone wanted to hear, the one everyone wanted to see. Remember what things were like when the Red Wings and Pistons were good and winning championships. You knew the excitement. The roars were deafening. There was Jesus in an arena as large as the Palace, feeding a crowd of 5000 men along with women and children. He did it all with two fish and five small loaves of bread. Everyone ate and was filled. And there was even more left over than what he started with. The people knew what they were going to do. They would make Jesus their king. He would provide everything they needed for their bodies. They would do it by force, if necessary, trying to keep him in Galilee so that they would make sure that they had enough. Hoarding sounded good back then as well.

God had given his people the promise that he would take care of all their needs: physically, yes. Think of how God provided for the people in the wilderness. He provided manna and quail. Their clothing and shoes never wore out. But most of the people were afraid. They didn't trust that God would provide for them that day, let alone tomorrow. The biggest promise that God gave was that he would provide a Savior from sin. He would give them eternal life. The people didn't want that. They wanted a king who would throw the hated Romans out of the land and establish a kingdom on earth with unlimited resources for everyone. Satan had convinced the people to reject Jesus.

Jesus withdrew from them, but they followed after him. The next day they found him and began, once again, to talk about bread. Then Jesus said: "I am the Bread of Life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." What in the world was he talking about? He said that he had come from the Father in heaven. He said that he was the true bread from heaven and that anyone who "ate" him, that is, received him by faith would live forever. He would raise them from death on the Last Day. But they stopped listening. If you had been there, it

would have been like Lion fans leaving Ford Field in the fourth quarter after the Lions threw an interception and the game was lost! Many simply headed home.

But it wasn't just the people who had just a passing acquaintance with Jesus. There were people who called themselves his disciples. They had followed Jesus for some time. They had listened to what he said. They heard his parables. They saw many of his miraculous signs beyond the feeding of the 5000. This was simply too much. "On hearing it, many of his disciples said, 'This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?'" And right after that, we hear: "From this time, many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him."

It seems hard for many of us to believe that people would desert our Lord so quickly. Jesus had showed nothing but love to everyone throughout his ministry. Some of those people who were following him were perhaps people that he had healed of some disease or deformity. He would soon make his final journey to Jerusalem where he would lay down his life for the sin of the world. He was preparing the troops for what was to come. And many of them leave! They did not believe that Jesus had the authority or power to bring eternal life. They reject him. They divorce themselves from him. They leave in disgust and plan to never come back. Wow!

Satan had gotten to the people. He convinced them that they had no hope. He convinced them that Jesus couldn't possibly be who he claimed to be. He convinced them that they really didn't need Jesus in their lives. After all, they were God's chosen people, descended from Abraham. That should count for something. In fact, it should count for everything. Sin wasn't all that damning, was it? Why would they want or need a Savior? And if they did, they certainly didn't want this man.

We have certainly heard a lot about social distancing in the last few weeks. That has been going on as long as the world existed. People have tried to distance themselves from God. Adam and Eve tried to hide from God in the Garden of Eden after they had rebelled against God and disobeyed him. People have invented new religions designed for them to feel better, to earn their way into God's good graces. Sadly, they are on a swift path to hell.

Satan has also worked hard, making inroads into the Christian Church. There are many denominations that call themselves Christian that take Christ and his atoning work completely out of the picture. They tell their people that the Bible is not reliable. They tell people that Jesus was just a man. They tell people that Jesus never did miracles and that his body is still rotting in some grave in Palestine. Satan works hard through the godless universities and their professors who mock anyone who calls themselves followers of Jesus. The media laughs when Christians say that they are praying during this time of crisis. There are many who say that they are done with Christianity. They fell for it once in their lives and they won't come back. And there are growing numbers of atheists who say that there is no God and never was. Satan is very convincing. He wants to drag as many to hell as he possibly can.

During this time of crisis one of two things will happen. We will either draw closer to God or we will drift farther away. Many are spending more time in prayer, spending time studying the Scriptures, reading devotional material, looking for ways that they can serve their neighbor. Others want nothing to do with God. They blame him for not giving them what they want, just like the people after the feeding of the 5000. When this is all over, many of our churches that are presently closed for worship will be filled with people singing God's praises or they will be empty with people who decided that they would leave too.

Jesus saw the people leaving. He turns to the Twelve and asks, "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus gave them the opportunity to respond. Was there emotion in his voice? Did he give them the opportunity to see which

of their friends and family members were leaving? Did they hesitate? We don't know, but we do know this. His words of life will draw us ever closer to him.

Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." Peter is such an interesting man. He had the highest highs and the lowest lows. Like us, there were times that he was cowering in fear and other times he was rock solid in his faith. When he was with Jesus, he made some of the greatest confessions. This was one of those times. He said that there was no other place to go. He was where he needed to be, with our Lord. And that is what we must confess as well.

Jesus has the words of eternal life. They are all written here in his Word, the Bible. They tell us everything we need to know. We aren't the first people to face a crisis. We aren't the first people to face deadly plague. We aren't the first people to wonder about our physical security and food and money. Some are looking for the government to save them. The writer of Psalm 146 says: Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save. When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing. Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his Go, the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea and everything in them – the LORD who remains faithful forever."

Many of our parents and grandparents went through the great Depression and two world wars. They had crops that failed and no jobs readily available. They didn't have Social Security and pensions and 401K's. They did have well-worn Bibles. They went to church. They trusted that the Lord would provide, and he did! We have the same God. He enables us to examine our priorities and see what is truly important and essential. Is God at the top of your list?

We know what our Lord Jesus was willing to do. He was willing to sacrifice everything, including his life, so that you and I might have eternal life. He went to the cross, taking all of our sins, including our doubts and fears. He took those sins and paid their price. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He is the Light of the World. He is the Resurrection, the Good Shepherd. And he is the Bread of Life!

False prophets will come. They always have. They will try to tell us that we really don't need Jesus. They will encourage you to leave him, now! But we have the one thing we need. He promises to be with us, even as we face trials and difficulties. He will lead us on to our heavenly home. We don't know what tomorrow will bring. We might not even have a service for Easter Sunday. But we live in the joy of Easter every day. Our Lord Jesus defeated death, and nothing can change that.

Satan, the world, and our own sinful flesh will continue to assail us. We have everything we need. When our Lord asks us, "You don't want to leave too, do you?" we answer, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!" AMEN.

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John 18:38

THE SON OF GOD GOES FORTH TO WAR: THE WARRIOR FACES SATAN'S ALLY, THE WORLD

INI

The older I get, the more I see what Pontius Pilate was talking about when he asked the question: "What is truth?" During these days of the coronavirus pandemic, you can turn on any channel of the news and listen to experts telling you what their version of the truth is. You have politicians and doctors and journalists. Each one will tell you his or her version of "the truth." Is this virus something as bad as the black plague? Will it kill untold millions of people? Is it something worse than the flu? Should the entire nation be quarantined for the next three months? Should we open up businesses in the next three weeks and simply see what happens? Can small businesses survive a shutdown for months? Will there be a recession or even a depression? Will churches be shut down for months? Will many churches survive? These are all good questions. We don't have the answer to them. We would all like the answer to them. We don't know what the truth is.

We live in a world where most people do not believe in absolute truth. They view truth as something relative. You have your truth and I have mine. There is such a thing as absolute truth and it is found in our Lord Jesus. In a changing, shifting world, we can always believe him and his promises. During this Lenten season, we have spent considerable time seeing our Savior go face to face with Satan, the prince of darkness. We know that Jesus would resist all the temptations of Satan, doing what we could not do. We know that Satan had allies. One of those allies is the world in which we live. Tonight, we see that THE WARRIOR FACES SATAN'S ALLY, THE WORLD!

God's truth is under attack. We see that every day. Many, if not most of the people in the world, think that the Bible is just a worthless book, not worth the paper it is printed on. They believe that there is no God. They believe that only man has the solution to the problems that we face. They believe that there is no heaven and they believe that there is no hell. They believe that Jesus, if he really existed, was only a man. They believe that he was not born of a virgin, did not perform miraculous signs, and certainly didn't rise from the dead. Many of the people who believe these things are people that you know, people you work with, even members of your own family. Are they right? Perhaps you even find yourself questioning these things.

Jesus was before the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate. Pilate was awakened early in the morning as some angry Jewish leaders brought him a man and demanded that he be put to death immediately. They didn't even have a charge. They just wanted him dead. The Romans did pride themselves on justice and Pilate would examine him. There was talk about Jesus being a king. That would have made Jesus a direct threat to the Romans. But Pilate was also smart enough to know that such a claim was bogus. The Romans would be out there listening, watching, looking for any threats and signs of treason or sedition. Certainly, they were at least familiar with Jesus. There were people who would have heard his message and reported if Jesus were speaking of rebellion against the government. On the contrary, Jesus would speak of rendering unto Caesar what was Caesar's and unto God, what was God's. Pilate could live with that.

Jesus would answer Pilate: "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." Did you catch those words "on the side of truth"? Truth has a side. On one side is the truth, on the other side is lies. Lies can be open and blatant or they can have some truth mixed in with lies. Lies are the very opposite of truth. Truth is meant for good. Lies are meant for evil.

Satan has an ally in the world. The world is opposed to everything that God stands for. The world around us accepts Satan's lies and challenges anyone who does not agree with it. The world claims to have answers to the big questions of life, but spouts nonsense. The world tells us that there is no God, that we just got here by mere chance, by the process of evolution. The world tells us that anyone who believes in a loving God who created everything is insane. St. John tells us: "Everything in the world - the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life - comes not from the Father but from the world."

The world believes that Jesus and his Word are simply foolishness. That is no surprise. St. Paul told the Corinthians: "The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit." Yes, the world will mock everything that we believe, teach, and confess. The world will laugh at us and call us morons. So what? On the Last Day, we don't have to stand before the world. We will stand before God.

The world wants nothing to do with Jesus. That is pretty plain. We live in the world. We catch the anti-Christian culture every day in movies, books, popular songs, and television shows that portray immoral lifestyles and values. We sometimes let down our guard and think, "Well, that's what it is," and are tempted to join in. It is easy to do, all too easy. We are in the world, but we are not to be of the world.

Is this all there is? If so, then we had better join the world in following its desire for wealth, pleasure, power, and glory. But this world is not the end. John writes: "The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever." The world wants us to concentrate on what passes away. We will be in this world only a short time, seventy or eighty years or so. And then what? Whatever we had will be gone. People will take our things or throw them away. Our bodies will be placed in a box and lowered into the ground.

But that is not the end. God tells us that we have an eternal soul. He has prepared a place for us where we will live forever with him. It is a place far greater than anything we can imagine on this earth. It is a place of perfect peace, joy, and love, a place where we will be reunited with the saints, a place where we will be with the Lord forever.

Everyone on the side of truth listens to our Lord Jesus. Pilate had the opportunity to listen to the truth and couldn't recognize it, even as he was staring Jesus in the face. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." That was not a misprint. Jesus did not claim to be a way, a truth, and a life. He did not claim to be one of many ways to the Father, all of which were equally valid and acceptable. He is the truth. He is the only way that we can make any sense of life. Any man-made solutions will surely fail. He is the only one who can keep our eyes focused on the heavenly goal.

Did you notice that Jesus never said, "I'm guessing" or "I wish" or "I hope" or "I think" or "possibly" or "maybe?" He always spoke with authority, the authority that he had as the very Son of God. He said "Verily" or "Truly, I tell you." "To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'"

The Scriptures tell us everything we need to know about life. They testify about Christ. Everything from Genesis to Revelation points to the one that the Father sent to be our Savior. We see our sin. We see our willingness to follow and believe Satan's lies rather than the truth. We see our willingness to be distracted by the baubles and bangles of this world, thinking that the solution to life's problems is by having more stuff. We see the attempts to make things bearable

by looking for solutions in alcohol, drugs, sex, power, money, and many other things. We see how all of those attempts ultimately fail. We see our helplessness and our hopelessness.

And then we see what God did for us. He loved us so much that he would send his own Son to do what we were unable to do and to undo what our sins had done. Jesus lived that perfect life that we could not live. He took all our sins to the cross and nailed them there forever, taking them out of God's sight. He rose from the grave and destroyed the power of death. Yes, these are the things that we celebrate next week, even if we are not physically present in the church building.

Did you notice that the robins are coming back? Did you notice that the grass is starting to green up? Did you notice that the flowers are beginning to come forth? Nothing is going to stop that, and nothing can stop our Lord Jesus from rising from the grave. He did that 2000 years ago. It is still true. It is also true that we will rise from the grave when Jesus gives the command. Our bodies will be reunited with our souls and we will live forever. That is truth!

Jesus' promise puts everything else into perspective. I don't know if we will be sequestered in our homes for two more weeks, two more months, or even longer. I do know where my journey will end, and I know where your journey will end. Once again, listen to St. John: "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one in you is greater than the one who is in the world."

That is a message to share. There are many people who feel nothing but hopelessness and despair. They are frightened and have no solution. We know the solution. There are ways that we can share our hope. We have God's Word. Paul writes to the Corinthians: "Though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds."

Share your hope as you speak to people on the phone. Post Bible passages and hymns on the internet. People are searching. The Word has divine power. It is greater than the world. On the very night he was betrayed, Jesus prayed for you and me: "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of this world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent you into the world."

Jesus has overcome the world and given you the treasure of his truth. Live boldly and confidently, knowing that God will use all things for your good and bring you safely home to himself! AMEN.

What is the world to me! My Jesus is my treasure,
My life, my health, my wealth, My friend, my love, my pleasure,
My joy, my crown, my all, My bliss eternally,
Once more then I declare: What is the world to me! CW, 477 v4