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Church of St Clement,

Alexandria, VA

The First Sunday in Lent, Year B

February 18, 2018

Mark 1:9-15

Satan Has a Kingdom, Too

“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

I repeated that phrase several dozen times on Wednesday,

making the sign of the cross out of the black ash of palm branches,

reminding people of their mortality – and

reminding people of the reality of sin in our world –

and our capacity to participate in this sin –

reminding people just in case the memory of what we mark on Palm Sunday – that turn we make from waving palm branches and shouting “hosanna in the highest” to joining the frenzied crowds shouting “crucify him” –

just in case this memory of our capacity to sin – had been buried among all our other daily concerns and distractions.

The ashes are a reminder of both sin and death – but the whole Ash Wednesday liturgy puts those realities within the context of God’s steadfast love and faithfulness. I preached on this theme – and about Psalm 103 on Wednesday.

“Sing” I said.

“We must sing and praise God – as the Psalmist urges us.”

We must sing and praise God because God has blessed us with divine and outrageous love and care.

We must begin our Lenten observance with song, I said.

Perhaps a song like: “Hosanna in the highest.”

And then I got home to the news... and that picture from Parkland Florida splashed across so many news outlets:

A woman holding onto another.

They collapse into each other in absolute anguish.

You can hear the sobs. The screams.

Though the picture is static and silent.

Right in the center of the photo, in the midst of the expression of our greatest fear – our worst nightmare – was the sign of that cross:

Black ash beneath blond bangs, having reminded this woman earlier in the day – of her mortality. Of the closeness of sin and death.

I just stared at that photo – and then I had to turn away.

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I had to turn away – but there is no ignoring the images – or the carnage they declare.

And there is no ignoring the evil in our world – Satan is as active now as he was in the story we just heard from Mark’s Gospel.

Jesus triumphed over the Devil – triumphed over Satan – alone in the wilderness among beasts and angels.

And later we will hear the story of how he triumphs over evil, over sin, over death once and for

all during those three Holy Days we will celebrate soon enough.

This triumph is a lasting victory and it is the promise of our faith, the promise of Easter.

Yet, we have today and tomorrow – we have the week ahead of us – and we all know evil, sin and death are still very real. Very present.

Satan's got a kingdom too, as an American folk song reminds us.

It is up and against this kingdom that Jesus announces his own – just after his baptism and his time in the wilderness.

As Christians we see so clearly the glory of this Kingdom, we know it, we experience it, we taste it and receive it, and we promise to join Jesus in seeing that this Kingdom spreads over all the earth – to the best of our ability and with Gods help – until that time when Jesus comes again to finally finally redeem all creation, to make all things new and to wipe away every tear.

But still...

And yet...

I think of what happened in Parkland Florida and I first see not the in-breaking of God's Kingdom; I first see the in-breaking of Satan's.

I see sickness, I see obsession, I see abuse, I see neglect, I see pain, I see indifference, I see an instruments of war in the hands of a kid. I see blood, tears, and bodies.

And I hear silence. And I hear platitudes. And I hear thoughts and prayers.

And I hear money – the thirty pieces of silver turned into millions and millions of dollars – pouring out and spilling over tables, over student desks, over coffins and into graves.

And I hear the brain trust of the most powerful lobby on earth waking up to a new day of

messaging and mongering.

And I hear the echoes of CS Lewis' Uncle Screwtape – writing to his Dear Wormwood about their patient's possible entry into a world of death and violence – writing to make sure they are clear about their strategy – writing to be clear that the enemy – in this case, God, doesn't win this soul...

The Devil knows what the game is about. Satan knows how to play the game.

Satan knows messaging and mongering.

“My dear Wormwood,” he writes. “I am delighted to hear that your patient's age and profession make [this possible] ...We want him to be in the maximum uncertainty, so that his mind will be filled with contradictory pictures of the future...There is nothing like suspense and anxiety for barricading a human's mind against the Enemy.

He wants men to be concerned with what they do;

our business is to keep them thinking about what will happen to them.”

My friends, our work is cut out for us.

In the turned-around world of the *Screwtape Letters*, the enemy is God.

We know the real enemy though – and the enemy is Satan. And Satan is real. If we had any doubt about that – that doubt was erased this week.

And there is no doubt Satan is masterful at manipulation; masterful at using his tools, masterful at sowing fear, apathy, division, distraction, confusion...

Evil may tempt you into believing that you aren't enough, your actions don't matter, or that you somehow need to arm yourself against your neighbor.

But, ultimately, evil is a weak little man who will lose this fight.

And we are the people of God, the people of the Kingdom of God, the people of the Good news. And we will roar.

Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God? Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?

Say it with me: I renounce them! I renounce them!

...ok then...

Well well well well well

Now, God's got a kingdom.

But the devil's got a kingdom too.

We're gonna tear down that devil's kingdom.

Let me tell you brothers, what we're gonna do.

...here at st clement...

We're gonna pray till we tear that Kingdom down,

Kingdom down,

We're a gonna pray till we tear that Kingdom down.

For we heard the voice of Jesus say,

"Satan, your kingdom must come down,

Must come down."

We're gonna shout till we tear that Kingdom down,

Kingdom down,

We're a gonna shout till we tear that Kingdom down.

For we heard the voice of Jesus say,
“Satan, your kingdom must come down,
Must come down.”

... and ...

We're gonna sing till we tear that Kingdom down,
Kingdom down,
We're a gonna sing till we tear that Kingdom down.

For we heard the voice of Jesus say,
“Satan, your kingdom must come down,
Must come down.”
And you know what we're singing today.
We are singing Alleluia.
We are singing Alleluia today.
We are standing outside graves today.
17 new graves.

And you all know, brothers and sisters, that even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia,
alleluia, alleluia.

Amen.