

INSIDE OUT

...the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. 27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

Having been pastor in this building for nearly twenty years, now, I have come to know Beautiful Savior like the back of my hand. I've played hide-and-seek games with teens and little ones, and I know all the best places to hide. I can tell the smell when a pilot light is out on the stove in the kitchen, or if a rodent has died in the furnace room. I can detect, sometimes, when people have come and gone by the marks left on the carpet or lights left on. I know the most likely places to find certain items, I have been in the heating tunnels and assisted with painting and plumbing and lighting and refrigerator, stove, and coffee pot repair. I've mown the grass, entered the retention pond in a wet suit, and helped lay wood chips in numerous locations.

You have a question about the building, I'm your guy. I have been in every room, in every corner, probably more times than anyone else with the possible exception of Pastor Otto, whose 50 years at Beautiful Savior grant him license to claim the older part of this building as his domain. On the outside, I yield to Roger and Kay Reetz, who've spent more time planting and gardening here than anyone can possibly imagine.

Beautiful Savior. I know it from the inside out.

Now somebody who wanted to exploit this building might try to get to know it too. They might sit outside in the parking lot and case the comings and goings so as to find a time when the building is vulnerable. They might look for an unlocked door or take advantage of a cracked window. They might even, on some pretense, make their way inside so as to get a general feel for the building. And, on a day of susceptibility, they might possibly break in and steal what they can find.

But, because they come from the outside and will never really know Beautiful Savior, --they will never know the building like me. And, because of that, there will always be places that I could use to keep something very valuable completely out of sight. Give me \$100 and I guarantee I can find a place where no one would find it. There is a great advantage in knowing the building from the inside out.

I make this distinction, between inside strength and outside danger, because I think it might help in understanding the words of our text. We learn, here, that when we are a child of God, His Holy Spirit comes to dwell within us. And I highlight that word, WITHIN. “Within” means that He knows us – He knows our thoughts, He knows our feelings, He knows our strengths, He knows our weaknesses, He knows our fears, He knows our faith, He knows our tears, He knows our pain. He knows it all – as an insider. In fact, He knows it better than we do!! From abilities to vulnerabilities. From actions to attitudes. From soaring joy to groaning frustration. And He is there, declares our text, to be our Helper, our Counselor, our Guardian, our Guide and our Intercessor.

Because, you see, our God loved us enough to rescue us from what would have been our complete and utter demise. When all of creation fell into darkness as a result of Adam and Eve’s devastating choice of themselves over God, our loving Father chose to rescue us out of the clutches of sin and death by sending His only Son. And Jesus paid the price with His own body and blood on the cross of Calvary so that the Enemy could be sent packing from having his way with us. The Holy Spirit drives him away and chooses to make His dwelling within us.

Yes, Jesus has driven the devil away from us. We are God’s children – and He has made us the Temple of the Holy Spirit.

Nevertheless, outside, the Tempter and his minions still roam and seek to have us – to rule us – to take us. And while they cannot come inside to dwell because of the power of God’s Spirit, they can still case and stalk, like prowlers, seeking to find those vulnerabilities that they can exploit in us. Seeking to find the unlocked door, the cracked window, or any other sign of weakness that they might use to weasel their way into our hearts so that they might lead us away from Christ.

So they are ever watchful – diligent – alert. Watchful enough to know, by our actions, if our poison is anger or lust. If it is fear or jealousy. If it is selfishness or greed. If it is pride or pleasure. They watch our clicks on the computer. They notice when we read a certain article in a magazine or watch on TV. They take note of those things that rile us up, that set fire to our yearnings, that lower our inhibitions, that inflate our opinion of ourselves. And they will do all in their power, once they know our poison, to try and put things in our path so that we might stumble and fall.

Think of the identity thief. He wants to get your password so that he can have access to your credit cards, your online banking, your email, your Social Security number, and whatever else is of interest to him – so that he can, in a way, become your master.

This is the Evil One. He wants to lure you toward the tempting things that will grab your heart and give him an opening to try and drive that Spirit of God right out.

Think of Judas, for instance. I think he sincerely began his role as a disciple with the best of intentions. I think he truly wanted to follow Jesus and live in faith. But the Tempter saw that he was vulnerable to greed. And so he began his campaign to plant opportunities for dishonesty – to pepper Judas' path with ways that he could exploit his role with the disciples to get more for himself.

And Judas fell prey. Soon his greed was an all-consuming passion that closed his heart from faith, and Judas betrayed his Savior for 30 pieces of silver.

St. Paul describes the warfare this way: “For 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 forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

Yes, the Tempter and his legions of fallen angels are a formidable opponent – and every day they look for vulnerabilities, weaknesses, and susceptibilities. And he would like nothing more than to come inside and stake his claim.

Here's the good news, though. God's Spirit knows us too, and He is there, as our text says, living within us, to fortify us, to pray for us, to strengthen us, to encourage us so that we remain in Christ and hold strong to our faith.

Imagine that Spirit of God inside of you. Close your eyes for a second and let yourself see Him hard at work reminding you that you are a child of God, reminding you that God's promises are there for you every day, reminding you that you have been called out of darkness and into God's light, reminding you that there is no temptation that is too strong for you to resist. Can you see Him – His sword in hand to wage war against the enemy and His arms of compassion there to embrace you in love and gentleness and forgiveness?

When my dad was dying in the hospital and I sat beside his bed, I remember not knowing what to pray for. My dad had suffered for a number of years with kidney cancer and it hurt me to see him in pain. Now he lay in the bed, having suffered a heart attack, and seemingly headed down his final journey this side of life. Should I pray for God to take him? Or should I pray for God to wake him up and bring him some measure of healing? And suddenly I remembered that Spirit, who dwells in me who takes my groanings and turns them into prayer, and I lifted my eyes and said, “Spirit, I count on You to lift up this message.”

A day later my dad awoke – but only long enough to say goodbye. He had fought the good fight. He had kept the faith.” The Spirit’s prayer brought peace and strength to all of us.

This is what He does, from within. In our weakness, He helps muster up the supernatural power to resist temptation. In our sadness, He helps invigorate the soul to remember God’s promises. In our fear, He helps give birth to confidence. In our doubts, He helps to kindle the spark of faith.

Because, He knows us. And He knows the Godhead. Intimately. And as we count on Him, He uses His knowledge of us and Unity in Trinity to help join us together. God and Man, united in love and faith, to stake our claim against every enemy that would seek to lead us astray. Jesus won the war on the cross of Calvary and gave us the promise of eternity. The Spirit dwells within us and uses His tools of Word and Sacrament to help us stay connected to Him who saved us.

So, while we need to stay alert to watch out for those areas of vulnerability and weakness, we also need not fear. Because, as St. John says in his first epistle, “Greater is He that is in US than he who is in the world.” That is, the Spirit is our powerful virus protection and gentle caregiver. And He is there to enable us to love the faith, to keep the faith, and to share the faith with the people around us.

Some years ago I was in a very small farm town in Idaho with one of my friends. It was one of those places where everyone knew each other, and it had a crime rate of zero. My friend shared with me that no one ever locked their doors, their cars, their bikes, their tractors – and no one was worried about that. This was quite striking to a city boy, whose front door had three locks and who knew a bit about break-ins from family experience. It was a beautiful thing.

Imagine the day that is yet to come for you and me. Because of Jesus we will soon know the beauty of heaven, where we will no longer have to be on alert, on guard, doors locked, windows shut. On that day, and forever after, the Enemy will be gone, and we will know utter peace and even as the Spirit lives in us, we will live with the Lamb of God in His kingdom.. Doesn't it just sound fantastic! That's our inheritance because of Jesus.

Until that day, though, may God bless you as you are strengthened and sustained by Him who lives within you. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.