

## **St. Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church—Muskego, WI**

**Sermon for May 3-4, 2008 Confirmation Sunday**

**Text: Selected Portions of John 17**

### **Theme: Protect Them By the Power of Your Name**

Could you imagine doing what Hannah did? Her son was three, maybe four years old. Then she took him up to the tabernacle—probably a good two days journey for her—and, after what must have been a teary goodbye, she left him there...for good. At first, you might think, well, she was leaving him at “church.” That must have made it easier. But don't forget about Eli's sons. Hophni and Phineas, who were serving at the tabernacle at that time. The scripture says that they had “no fear of the Lord” and their many sins, including sexual immorality, were no secret to “all Israel.” Would you leave your four-year-old son to be raised in that kind of setting?

It makes me think of the young people who are being confirmed this weekend, young people and their families, who have become like family to me. A part of me wants to lock the doors of this church this weekend and never let them out. Why?

Let me share the stories of three young men I know. All of these young men were once in my confirmation class. All of them were raised in strong Christian homes and displayed a personal faith in Jesus as their Savior.

The first is a young man whose friends turned out to be a bad influence. When they decided to rent an apartment together after high school, he got involved with drugs. Trying to cover up his addiction eventually compelled him to lie to his parents and friends. His need for money got so bad that he even began to steal from own family. All the while he knew what he was doing was wrong. Burdened with all that guilt, drugs became a welcomed escape.

The second young man is one of those guys you think has everything going for him. Athletic, good looking, popular. He made some bad choices, alcohol and drugs among them. And then he experienced a number of difficult circumstances—all beyond his control. His life was crashing down around him. He began acting out in anger—hurting the people he loved. He called me late one night. He didn't want to live any longer

The third young man is an example of how powerfully the cultural influences of the world can reshape the way we think. He'd come to the conviction that he was homosexual. He felt that if God made him with these kinds of impulses, then God must be OK with it.

These kinds of stories are more common than you think. And they shouldn't surprise us either. This is the reality, my friends, of the world in which we live. This is the reality of the power of the sinful nature that dwells inside each of us. This is exactly what Peter was talking about when he said that the devil prowls around like a roaring lion just looking for someone to devour.

Now do you understand why I just want to lock these doors and never let these young people out?

And it's not just these young people that walk into the lion's jaws when they walk through those doors. I met with a young couple this past week, married five years, under so much stress because of the career and financial pressures and expectations, who have so much hurt and pain and anger between them, that it will literally take a miracle to rescue their marriage. It doesn't matter if we were confirmed fifty years ago or five, we live in a spiritually perilous world. In fact, on second thought, maybe we shouldn't let anybody out of here!

Jesus faced a similar situation. He knew that after his death and resurrection, he was going to leave this world and ascend into heaven. He was going to leave his disciples behind to deal with the very same godless people who vehemently opposed and finally crucified him. If I were Jesus, I'd wonder if leaving those disciples behind all alone like that was really a good idea. Jesus didn't lock them up, did he? He sent them out.

Our Gospel lesson today was a portion of John, chapter 17...a beautiful and powerful prayer of Jesus, spoken the night before his death. In this prayer Jesus prays first for himself. As Satan hits him full force with temptations to abandon his mission, Jesus prays for strength to do his Father's will. Then Jesus prays for the disciples he would leave behind. He prays that God would protect them by the power of his name. Finally, he prays for you and me, as well as for our confirmands this weekend, that we all may remain united, connected to Jesus and to our heavenly Father through faith.

And so here's our comfort as we think about sending these young people out into the world, as we think about how spiritually dangerous our walk is no matter who we are. Our comfort is that Jesus prayed for us, for our protection, that it is God's will to keep us safe, and that God has a powerful tool, weapon, whatever we want to call it, to protect us. And that weapon, that tool is his name.

How can a name protect us? To answer that question, we need to understand what God's name really is. God's name is not just, "the Lord," or "holy Father" or "Jesus Christ." God's name is everything God is, everything God does, everything he stands for, everything he has revealed to us about himself...in his Word. When Jesus talks about God protecting us by the power of God's name, he's talking about protecting us with the truth.

It was a lie that first brought sin into this world... "*you will be like God.*" And every desire to sin today can be traced back to believing some kind of lie. "*Drugs will help me escape my pain.*" "*I'll be happier if I get a divorce.*" "*If I just have a little more money, my worries will be over.*"

Why do so many people today feel afraid, or overwhelmed? Why are so many people angry and depressed? Why do people suffer from high blood pressure or work themselves to death? These are all symptoms...of Satan's lies. Want some more examples? "*The bad things that happen to people is proof that God is not a loving God. You can't trust him.*" "*God is angry with you because of our sin. You better do more, work harder.*" "*You better take care of yourself, because God won't take care of you.*"

The TRUTH of God's name, the TRUTH of who he really is, is the only thing that can protect us from these kinds of lies. In verse 3 Jesus says, "***Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.***"

Here's a truth that will set you free: The true God is the God who put his money where his mouth is. He didn't just say he loves you. He sent his Son to live and die for you. He didn't just send his Son to visit for a while. He entered the very story of our lives by becoming human like us. And when the right time came God removed all his protection from his Son and allowed the evil of this world to completely devour him. Your sin has been paid for! You are forgiven! God is not angry with you. He loves you. That's the real God and that's the TRUTH!

The whole goal of our confirmation instruction is to drill into our heads who the real and TRUE God is, along with the TRUTH of what he does and promises, so that when Satan comes along with his lies, we immediately see them for the lies they are.

So what am I afraid of? Our confirmands have made it through confirmation class so they're set for life. Well...yes and no...

Several months back a young lady asked to sit down and talk with me about some questions she had. She, too, could only have been confirmed about six or seven years ago. I was taken aback by some of her questions. Like is the devil real and is it really against God's will to live together before marriage. But again, if you think about it, how much do you even remember about last week's sermon. I'd have a hard time remembering...and I preached!

No, the young people being confirmed this weekend aren't set for life. None of are. As soon as we walk out that door, maybe even before, Satan is whispering his lies and confusing us. How quickly we can lose the truth.

But that is exactly why God had his name recorded for us in black and white. This (hold up the Bible) is God's name. Skim through John 17 quickly and see how many times Jesus talks about making his Father known through his Word. And so the answer to the question is also "yes." These young people are set for life. We all are...in so much as we stay connected to the truth of God's Word.

Jesus prays: "***Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth***" (17:17). To sanctify means to set apart. It's the truth of God's Word that sets us apart, that protects us, from the spiritual dangers of this world.

You don't have to look far to see the answer to Jesus' prayer in your life. In baptism God set you apart by putting his name on you. He gave you the faith to believe that you are his child, that he will always love you as a perfect father loves his child. No matter how many times you wander, no matter how horribly you squander the gifts he's given you, he's there with open arms to welcome you home.

In worship, in weekly confession and absolution, God has assured you again and again of the truth of his forgiving love. No matter what you did or failed to do, he forgave you. Through the encouragement in the hymns and songs of worship he has reminded you again and again of the truths of his Word. He has spoken to you through the lessons and sermon, planting and/or nurturing the TRUTH every week.

And next week for the first time, the confirmands will kneel at the Lord's Table. There they will personally receive Jesus' body and blood. They will get up and go in peace because the TRUTH has set them free from whatever burdens they carry to that table.

In the same way every time you open your Bible and spend time meditating on God's Word, Jesus' prayer is answered. God is protecting you by the power of his name.

So we are set for life, so long as we don't cut ourselves off from the power of God's name. I tell my confirmation students: there are 168 hours in the week...56 of them are spent sleeping (more like 70-80 if you're a teen) that leaves about 100 waking hours. If you spend only one of those hours a week at church where God is able to recharge you with the truth of his name and during the other ninety-nine the world is bombarding you with all its lies, what do you think is going to happen? Who's going to have the greatest influence?

The good news is: God is faithful. Remember the three young men I talked about at the beginning of this sermon. God led the first to move out, to get help, and to overcome his addiction. He's still dealing with guilt, but God's forgiveness gives him hope. Through the help of God's Word and Christian family and friends, God has helped the second young man to gain control over his anger and depression. God is still working of the heart of that third young man. God is faithful. He will never give up.

In his prayer Jesus says, "***As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world***" (17:18). Jesus sent his disciples into the world so that they could bring the truth of God's Word to people who were imprisoned by Satan's lies. My friends, we have to do the same. We

have to send these young people out so that they can be the salt and the light that God intends them to be. We ourselves go out so that we can be salt and light. And we do so, not with fear, but with confidence because we know the incredible protective power of God's name! Amen.

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