

Luke 22:31 “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. ³²But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”

Dear Friends in Christ,

In the Martin house, my contribution to cooking is our breakfasts. One breakfast delight this Wisconsin-born boy had never heard of before meeting his charming future wife was fried cornmeal mush. That’s not a northern thing, or at least not a Wisconsin thing. When I first heard about it, to be honest, I was kind of hoping I wouldn’t have to try it. And the first time my future in-laws served it, I was kind of hoping they would never do that again. But fried cornmeal mush has grown on me, and these days I can fry a mean mush.

Well, what does this have to do with Lent? If you cook cornmeal mush around your place, you may have already guessed. Our reading started with Jesus saying, ***“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat.”***

What in the world does that mean: Satan wanting to sift Jesus’ disciples as wheat? Well, in order to sift something you need one of these, a sieve. (*Hold up a sieve.*) This isn’t a grain sieve; this is a flour sieve, but the principle is the same. And if you know about cornmeal mush the lightbulb is already burning.

When you fry mush, bits of the cornmeal loaf get into the breading flour. At the end, if you want to save a little money and reuse the flour (and who doesn’t these days,) you have to sift out the bits. You put the leftover flour in here and you shake and shake and shake till all the flour is in the bowl and the cornmeal bits and pieces are in the sieve. Then, do you know what you do with the bits and pieces? You throw them in the trash.

“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat.” It starts to make sense.

In Jesus’ metaphor, Satan was the sifter and he was wanting to sift Jesus’ disciples. That’s kind of scary. It’s scary as Jesus sits there in the candlelit room, while the forces of evil reach their high water mark, and he is about to be murdered. It’s scary as Judas had gone out to find the religious leaders and tell them that everything was ready; that they should gather the guards, light the torches, strap on the swords—and by the way, while you’re at it, count out those thirty pieces of silver.

While that’s going on, in the upper room Jesus warns his eleven closest followers that something evil their way comes. Jesus is warning them with a dire warning. This is something that should have made hairs on their arms stand on end—to be cast into the hands of Satan. And it wasn’t just Simon (aka, the disciple Peter) that Jesus was talking to. One of the strange things about the English language is that the word “you” can mean one person or several people. And so there can be a confusion here. We naturally think that when Jesus says, ***“Satan has asked to sift you...”*** that Satan has asked to sift Simon as wheat, but the word “you” is plural. So what is happening is Jesus is talking to Simon as

the leader of the Twelve, but telling him that,

SATAN HAS ASKED TO SIFT YOU ALL

When Satan is on the lose, we ought to get serious. Elsewhere Satan is called a roaring lion, perhaps not coincidentally, by the Apostle Peter. In First Peter 5 he reminds Christians that, “*Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.*” You’ve watched enough wildlife shows to know how a lion sifts his prey. He (or usually she) charges after the herd until one of them shows itself to be slower and weaker, and then she unrelentingly chases that one.

So it would be with Peter. He would find himself in a courtyard surrounded by Christ-haters, and he would be sifted and sifted until he denied Jesus three times. So it would be with Judas. In the early morning light Judas would be all-alone in the world, feeling unable to return to his former friends and rejected by his partners in crime, and so he would end his life in Satan’s clutches. So it was with King David. All his soldiers off to war, he alone walked the roof of his palace in Jerusalem and allowed the sight of beautiful bathing woman to fill his heart with lust and eventually murder. So it had been with Cain. Out in the field, far from the houses of the rest his family, just Cain, except for one more person, his brother Abel. Sifting, sifting, sifting. So it is with you and I, Satan patiently watching and waiting, sifting us until our moment of weakness or pride or anger or sorrow—and he pounces like a lion upon its prey.

There is a hymn that would sing Jesus’ words of warning into our hearts,

I walk in danger all the way; The thought shall never leave me

That Satan, who has marked his prey, Is plotting to deceive me. (431:1)

This is Jesus’ warning to his disciples and us. Satan is dangerous, and Satan is serious. He is way more of both than we are of either. He is always on the hunt, and when he catches us, he has no pity. He wants you in hell.

Not only is he serious and strong, we are hopelessly weak when relying on our own strength and agility. An African antelope has a better chance.

Jesus’ next words are meant to give courage, “***I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail.***” May they give you courage! But I can imagine Peter thinking, “Oh, Jesus, don’t worry about it. I’ll be fine.”

Jesus’ warning is a call to wake up, to recognize how dangerous Satan is. Jesus would warn us about Satan’s designs. In one night, all those years with Jesus, the growing faith wrought by the Word of God, can be thrown away, for eternity! With one of the Twelve, it was so!

So, what do you think Jesus wanted Peter and the other disciples to do about it? I would guess that he wanted them to be a little bit scared, in a healthy way. I am sure he also wanted them to take great comfort in the fact that he, their Lord, no ordinary person like you or me, had prayed for them and their faith.

I would guess that Jesus wanted them to respond like that nameless man whom Jesus

confronted over his doubt and who pleaded, “*Help me overcome my unbelief!*” (Mk 9:24). I would guess that Jesus wanted them to react like the author of the first words of Psalm 77, “*I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me. When I was in distress, I sought the Lord; at night I stretched out untiring hands.*” I imagine that’s how Jesus would have liked his disciples to respond.

But in the words right after our reading, this is how Peter responded: “*Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.*” Then he swore it on a stack of Bibles. Then all the others with him. (Mt 26:35) Then in a few short hours that cock-sure disciple utterly disgraced himself and his Savior.

Do you know the response I usually get when I mention to people the spiritual danger I see them in? It is *exactly* the same. “*Oh, pastor, you don’t need to worry about me. I believe. I’m not drifting.*” That’s what the disciples said! “*I pray. I have devotions.*” Well, the disciples were one up on you, they were eating a meal with Jesus himself!

Jesus’ assurance that he had prayed that Simon’s faith would not fail was a much needed bucket of cold water in his face because it implied that Peter’s faith would have failed but for Jesus. And it would have. Sometimes Jesus needs to shake us delusional believers awake to real and present spiritual dangers we play with. And when we hear those warnings, the first words out of our mouth should not be to dismiss the pastor (or another concerned Christian) as an excessively religious person who just doesn’t understand how the man/woman on the street lives and makes ends meet and fulfills societal expectations. Instead, listen to Jesus’ messenger!

Remember, that messenger is doing what Jesus instructed him, “***And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.***” The pastor (or other Christian) is a sinner like you, who must totally rely on Jesus to save him, who is a member of God’s kingdom only by God’s grace, who wants to get to heaven with you, in the blood-bought robes of Christ’s righteousness. And remember, he is doing what Jesus has told him to do: “***Strengthen your brothers!***”

Satan may ask God to sift you as wheat, but remember that Satan’s power is limited. If he has to ask permission, he clearly cannot do whatever he wants. God may grant that permission, but if he does, he will use it to separate you from something harmful. He will also use it to do the opposite of sifting. Instead of the separation Satan desires, God will actually bring you closer. He will bind you ever more tightly to Jesus. Amen.¹

¹ (This last paragraph from the NPH sermon in this Crucial Hours series.)