

Pastor T.C. Arnold
3rd Sunday in Lent
Exodus 8:16-24
March 23rd, 2014

Paul's first mission endeavor as a brand new convert to Christianity was to the island of Cyprus. Barnabas was with him. So was John Mark (mostly known as just Mark). It says in Acts chapter thirteen that Paul, Barnabas and Mark proclaimed the Word of God in the synagogues throughout the whole island. While doing this they came upon a man by the name of Bar-Jesus. He was a magician and a false prophet. They also encountered Elymas who was also a magician and a false prophet. Bar-Jesus (which means "Son of Jesus – His name was meant to confuse the people even further) and Elymas worked hard at turning the people away from the truth proclaimed by Paul and his companions.

Paul responded by saying, "*You son of the devil (not of Jesus – but the devil), you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?*" After saying these things the Lord struck Bar-Jesus and Elymas blind. Darkness fell upon them and the people who saw what had happened believed in the Lord. Talk about starting your ministry with action and excitement.

Just as it was in the early church of the New Testament, it is today. We have a world filled with imposters. Some spout off false teachings that lead people astray – Mary Baker Eddy, Joseph Smith, and L. Ron Hubbard to name a few in recent past. There are those closer to our age as well – Jim Jones, David Koresh, or even that elderly radio preacher in California, Harold Camping, who gave a specific date he said could be deciphered through math of when Jesus would come again. There are hoards of others. These are the ones who make straight paths crooked. They gain a following, become popular and believable, and then people unwittingly follow.

In the Old Testament text appointed for this the 3rd Sunday in Lent, Moses had his own run-in with those who made the straight path crooked – who practiced the magic arts and deceived others like Paul encountered in Cyprus. And like those on Cyprus who saw what the Lord had done – those of us today who know the ways of those who attempt to deceive – the magicians in the court of Pharaoh could do no other than admit what had just happened. The plague of gnats, just like the plague of frogs and blood before, was from, "*the finger of God.*" "God made it happen," they would say. "God had His hand on producing the gnats. We can't do this one," the magicians would say. "We can't just make gnats appear."

Sleight of hand was out of the question. Trickery was not how this was done. The magicians admitted it. This was God's work – His finger made this happen. The dark and demonic arts were not in play. Moses is not making this stuff happen by the work of the devil – much like Jesus was not casting out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons. This is the finger of God. Let's admit it together. We Christians don't deny it.

Beloved, know the finger of God. I don't mean that you should know how the finger of God works. Many times God works in ways that foreign to us. We don't understand what He is doing or even why. We can't always say that everything God does had a resounding personal quality for you and me – making us happy. No, rather, what I mean by "know the finger of God" is that I want you to know that He is at work. His is in charge and He never leaves you to fend for yourself.

Often times I know we feel this way about what is happening to us. There are times when God's silence in the midst of our crises is deafening. How many times have we cried out for the

finger of God to act – to work in a favorable way – to relieve our suffering, to produce anything (gnats would be fine... I just want to make sure you are listening to me), and then nothing. Nothing happens. Nothing but more suffering and more heartache. And we don't see this stuff in our own life alone. No, it's happening to those we love as well. They can't catch a break and we can't either. We pray and it doesn't seem to help. It's time to take matter into our own hands.

It's at this point where our own sins take us away from "the finger of God." Anger wells up inside of us and we want to blame someone and perhaps God – you know, since He is God, he is the most logical one to blame. He's to blame when our sufferings become greater than we can bear, or, even if suffering exists in our life at all. Much like, it's that other guys fault that the company is not doing so well. It's my teacher's fault I'm getting the bad grades. It's the incompetent people around me that is making my life miserable... and on and on...

Perhaps with this attitude we say, "Yes preach it preacher, that church attender that is sitting beside me needs to hear that word of God's law and repent. I wish my co-worker, my neighbor, could hear what is being said because they are the ones who need to turn from their evil deeds"... and on and on... again.

Beloved, this is how the finger of God works. It works through the Word to show you – yes you – that the law preached is preached to you – each of you. The finger of God is God at work to show all of you, me and everyone, that we are in need of repentance and returning to the Lord. The finger of God in the Exodus text placed judgment upon the people with a plague that was from nothing other than God Himself. The finger of God shows you where you have missed the mark and are in need of God's blessed mercy.

And so now, let's look at the finger of God for you. Because it does not reach down from the sky and help you, heal you, make you happy, or change things all for the better. Well, your God can indeed accomplish those things. But that's not the finger of God. The finger of God for you, is God's whole hand... It's his whole arm, His whole body. You see, the finger of God was and is actually a finger attached to the rest of Him. Jesus came in all flesh – God and man – and did the redemptive work of dying for your life. God's finger did more than reach down to touch you. It came to dwell with you, to be with you, to give you the sustenance of eternal life. The finger of God is His body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins. It couldn't be more real, more tangible. His finger is His divine work for you and that is constant, that is for each and every one of your days and your nights.

Paul told those false prophets in Cyprus, "*Will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of God?*" It's no secret. It's not magic. Try as those magician in Pharaoh's court may, they couldn't produce gnats. Why? It's simple. It's the finger of God. We dare not let anything get in the way of God's straight path. So much is out there to confuse, to make that clear path to salvation fraught with canyons, land mines, and whatever else that tries to stand in the "clear" way. The path is not crooked. The path leads to Calvary, where we are headed this season of Lent. And there it all becomes clear to us. Our God loves us "that" much. He stretched out His hands and died. That's the finger of God. That's the clear path. It is Him. He came to save. He is the way. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen