

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Don’t Give Superstitions an Inch; You Don’t Need Them Anyway”

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*“Therefore watch yourselves very carefully . . . beware lest you raise your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them, **things** that the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven. But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be people of his own inheritance” (Deut. 4:15,19-20).*

A few years ago, I read the book “The Hungry Ocean.” It’s about the life of commercial fishermen. One chapter was all about their superstitions, which are many. A small sample: because pigs don’t swim well, pork is never served on commercial fishing boats, nor will they even use the words “pork” or “ham.” It’s bad luck. Setting sail on a Friday is also considered unlucky and forbidden. They’ll wait until a minute past midnight to ensure their departure happens on a Saturday. These boats are packed to the gills with state-of-the-art technology, but the people who use all that high-tech gear are held captive by old superstitions.

In our text, the people have been freed from Egyptian slavery. They have crossed over the Red Sea and are now in the wilderness. Moses says to them, “Watch yourselves very carefully . . . beware lest you start bowing down to the sun and the moon and the stars and serve them.” In other words, don’t go back to that slavery. The Lord is your God. You are his people. He freed you, He brought you up out of Egypt, He’s taking care of you. Trust in him. Don’t go back to the idols and superstitions of Egypt. Watch yourselves very carefully.

Are superstitions a problem today? Would you think twice before having a surgery on a Friday the 13th? Some athletes won’t change their underwear when they’re on a winning streak. There are no green cars in NASCAR races; it’s considered bad luck. In many of the tall buildings in Manhattan, there is no 13th floor and no airline ever schedules a Flight 13.

Many are so skeptical and mistrusting of the Bible and its message, and yet so accommodating to irrational and unfounded beliefs and practices. I’ve said it before, “When you believe nothing, you are more likely to believe anything.” As a culture I think we are therefore becoming ever more receptive to superstitions, conspiracy theories and the like. Today some say, “Covid is a hoax. 5g is the real killer.” Some even believe governments enabled Covid so they could install 5g under the cover of a lockdown. C.S. Lewis once told a fellow, instead of always doubting Scriptures, “Maybe you should try doubting something else for a change.”

At the root of it all is the locus of control. When people feel out of control, sometimes they’ll resort to magic or superstition to try to regain a sense of control. Superstitious practices try to harness and manipulate unseen forces and make them work for your own benefit. In a Wall Street Journal article, flight attendants are noticing more superstitious behavior especially as the passengers are boarding. People do all sorts of things. They kiss the plane, they turn in tight circles, they do a little jig in the jetway (10/3/13).

Paul wrote, “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive . . . human tradition and false, worldly religious teachings” (Col. 2:8). And from Deuteronomy 18, “Let no one be found among you who . . . practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord” (10-12).

Some even try to coerce God by using rituals and utilize His powers for personal purposes. Their prayers can sound more like incantations and formulas and are designed not to entreat God but manipulate Him.

I remember observing a neighbor in St. Louis bury a little statue of St. Joseph upside down with the belief that it will help the house sell more quickly. I hope the cross hanging on the rear-view mirror isn't thought of as a sort of magical protection against accident, or the cross in the purse as a sort of rabbit's foot. Similarly, prayer chains are good, until we begin to think of them as a way to compel God to do our will with massive numbers as if He were a politician that needed lobbying before acting.

Psychologists say magical rituals offer the illusion of control and can quiet a person's anxieties. But you don't need them. Let the Lord quiet you with his love. He's the One in control and He loves you. That's a powerful combination. You don't have to try to arrest control from Him or any other unseen forces. As the Lord took his people out of Egypt through the water to be His own, so He has set us apart by taking us through the waters of Holy Baptism to be His own people freed from sin and death and the power of the devil. Don't voluntarily become a slave again.

The devil is always trying to lead us astray, and one of his favorite methods is to shift our trust away from the Lord and onto our own actions. We, however, are saved by grace, not by our own actions. We trust in the Lord's grip on us, not our grip on unseen forces.

Friends, we don't need to try to harness unseen spirits or manipulate our luck. We don't need to try to coerce God into doing something for us. He loves us, and His impulse already is to help and save and protect us. Any God who knows how many hairs are on your head because he cares that much doesn't need to be coerced. He doesn't need to be pried into action. On his own initiative, while we were yet sinners, He died for us. Clearly, He loves us and is in our corner. Paul wrote, “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32).

Jesus loves you, and when someone loves you, he doesn't need to be manipulated into doing something good for you. He'll do it gladly of His own accord. If the needs of a common house sparrow move God to action, how much more so the needs of His dearly beloved children. Therefore, no day or date is to be feared by those who belong to Jesus. No black cat or broken mirror can change His good plans for you. Nothing you do or fail to do can change the fact that you are His baptized and redeemed child.

Trust in God. Don't put your faith in objects or rituals, but in the One who holds the world in His hands, the One who holds you in His hands, and the One who alone blesses us and gives us eternal life. Amen.