



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094
(920)261-2570
www.goodshepherdwi.org

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY OF PENTECOST September 28, 2014

“Superstition

(Deuteronomy 4:15-20)
Rev. David K. Groth

“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).

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, You exalted Your Son to the place of all honor and authority. Enlighten our minds by Your Holy Spirit that, confessing Jesus as Lord, we may be led into all truth; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You, and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

At the seminary, we were all in debt. None of us had any money. So we looked for cheap entertainment where we could find it. For the guys from Wisconsin that meant Sheepshead . . . lots and lots of Sheepshead. As you know, sometimes the cards just don't go your way. You pick up the blind and it makes a bad hand much worse, and though we talked a lot about mercy on that campus, at the card table those guys had none. They would pour on you all the wrath they could muster and then later tell you how much they enjoyed doing it. In Sheepshead a lot depends on the cards you are dealt. Therefore one of our guys, to change his luck, would occasionally stand up and walk around his chair three times counter clockwise. He didn't believe any that. He wasn't superstitious. It was his sense of humor, particularly in that place with disapproving professors looking on from a distance. We told him his score had nothing to do with the cards; he was just a bad Sheepshead player, and that he should sit down and quietly receive his punishment.

Superstition. Our Old Testament lesson warns against superstition and idolatry. The people have been newly freed from Egyptian slavery, have been made God's people by covenant, and are now out there in the wilderness. And 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. (Remember, the sun was one of the God's of Egypt, and they also looked to the moon and the stars for counsel.) Deuteronomy 32, "There is no god beside me" (v. 39). That is, there is no other supernatural help.

Moses knew the work of taking the people out of Egypt was over. That was the easy part. Now the hard work of taking Egypt out of the people had begun. That would prove much more difficult. "Watch yourselves very carefully" Moses says. Don't go

back to all that idolatrous drivel and tripe from Egypt. The Lord is your God. You are his people. He brought you up out of Egypt. Look to him. Trust in him. Don't fall prey to superstition and idolatry.

Are superstitions a problem today, or in our techy world have we've finally outgrown them? Last year I read the book "The Hungry Ocean". It's about the life of commercial fishermen. One chapter was on their superstitions. For example, because pigs don't swim well, the crew never uses the words pig or pork, and no pork is ever served on commercial fishing boats. It's just asking for trouble they think. Sailing on a Friday is considered unlucky and is absolutely forbidden. Boats and men ready to sail on a Friday during the day will often wait until one minute past midnight, making their official departure Saturday morning. Whistling aboard a boat is a real no-no. (Greenlaw, pp. 132-134). One captain, if the fishing was favorable would neither shower nor shave and also forbade the crew to shower or shave. In his mind he was doing everything in his power to maintain the status quo. Imagine, these boats are packed to the gills with high tech gear now. And yet the people who use that gear are slaves to old and new superstitions.

What superstitions have a little grip on you? Our text says, "Watch yourselves very carefully." Don't give them an inch. Don't let them sway your behavior one way or another. For example, on a Friday the 13th, would you hesitate to fly . . . or have surgery? If you're a golfer, do you have a lucky marker for the greens? Do you ever check your horoscope? If you're a sports fan do you have a lucky jersey? Are you sometimes convinced the Packers play much better when you're not watching them?

Sometimes it's bad religion that feeds into superstition. 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 quicker. Similarly, many baseball players make the sign of the cross before stepping up to the plate. Is it to protect them from injury? Is it to

improve their batting average? Does the cross hanging from your rear view mirror somehow add a layer of protection? Is it a Christian version of a rabbit's foot?

The rock and gem show is coming up at the Jefferson County fairgrounds. I go there for the fossils. Some go for the crystals. I remember one woman strolling with her hand hovering over the crystals. She was checking out their energy levels, and trying to teach her little granddaughter how to do the same. Similarly, feng shui is taking off in America. It's the Chinese art of arranging living spaces and furniture according to energy paths and levels. It's becoming a big business in America.

Many are so skeptical and mistrusting of the Bible and its message, and yet so accommodating to new and old irrational and unfounded beliefs and practices. C.S. Lewis wrote to one of them saying, "Maybe you should try doubting something else for a change."

In many of the tall buildings in Manhattan, there is no 13th floor and no airline ever schedules a Flight 13. 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. One attendant said watching people come aboard has become something of a show for the staff (10/3/13).

I've said it before, but it bears repeating. When you believe nothing, you are more likely to believe anything. Our culture is rapidly drifting away from the Christian faith, and as a result, we are becoming ever more receptive and susceptible to superstitions, and conspiracy theories and the like. Nature abhors a vacuum but so does our spiritual nature. Therefore we can expect to see more of this in the future.

Not long ago I was listening to National Public Radio doing an interview with Dr. Paul Offit. He's the chief of the Division of Infectious Diseases at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, and a member of the Center for Disease Control. He just wrote a book calling for the rigorous

testing of alternative medicines. He said if an alternative medicine works, it's a medicine. If it doesn't work, it's no alternative and shouldn't be sold. But as it is, there's this untouchable halo on what has become a 34 billion dollar industry that is largely unregulated. He's asking that the same standards applied to conventional medicines should also be applied to alternative medicines to prove they are effective, but also prove they are safe. Then the callers started coming on and I was startled by the vitriol of some of the listeners who attacked this doctor with a religious-like fervor. I've read since he has received hate mail, even death threats. It makes me think he's on to something here. He's an iconoclast. He's taking a whack at what has become, for some, not all, but for some a golden bull, an idol. After all, the lines between superstition and irrational beliefs and idolatry, those lines are all very blurry.

“Watch yourselves very carefully” Moses said. As the Lord took his people out of Egypt through the water to be his own, so he has set us apart through the waters of Holy Baptism to be his people. Don't go back to the drivel and tripe. 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 John wrote, “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 Jn. 5:21). 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).

Remember 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 wisdom, our own actions, our own strength. He instills fear in us, fear that God really isn't watching over us and intervening for us, at least not like he should, and so you have to take matters into your own hands. Forward this email to your friends and you'll have good luck. Fail to do that, and you'll have bad luck. Launch the fishing boat on a Saturday rather than a

few minutes earlier on a Friday, and you'll have a better catch and safer voyage. Wear the same underwear you did when you hit the grand slam and your odds will improve. Babe Ruth said, "I had only one superstition. I made sure to touch all the bases when I hit a home run." And Groucho Marx said, "If a black cat crosses your path, it means the animal is going somewhere."

Francis Bacon noticed, "The root of all superstition is that men observe when a thing hits, but not when it misses." Church people like to say funerals come in threes. But we only notice that cliché when it happens, not when it doesn't.

Superstitions give you the illusion of control, and that can be psychologically comforting for people, especially to those with a high need for control coupled with a sense of helplessness. Superstitions provide them some sort of hedge against uncertainty. But here's the deal: those who don't know what uncertainty is or insecurity, also don't know what faith is.

So what's the answer? I think hard, objective science can be of help, an effective antidote to superstitions. Those copper and magnetic bracelets that are supposed to help with arthritis . . . do they work? Hard science says not one little bit, not any more than a placebo. But I can tell you a lot of people made a lot of money pimping copper bracelets as a treatment for arthritis. I think prayer can be an antidote to superstitions as well. When tempted or challenged by anything, I would always recommend prayer.

But most of all trust, trust not in man, nor in your own wisdom or strength. Trust the Lord knows you and knows your needs, knows how many hairs are on your head for goodness sake. So we know he's not lax or indifferent toward you. He died for you. As Paul said, "How will he not also, along with [this sacrifice], graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32). Trust that he who has his eye even on the sparrow is also watching over you. Trust that he loves you, as promised, and is taking care of you. Trust that he is your shield and fortress from evil. No day or date is to be feared by those who belong to Jesus.

One last thing: the White House is perhaps the most secure home in America. And still a week ago some guy managed to get through the door and inside. Don't put your trust in high tech gear *or* in ancient superstitions. Not everything that is high tech will protect or save us, and not everything that is ancient is good or right or helpful. Trust in *him*. Trust that his mighty angels are on constant vigilance, and far stronger than any rabbit's foot of one sort or another. Don't put your faith in objects or rituals, but on 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.

