

“Overcoming the Devil”

Mark 3: 20-35

Proper 5B, Boise, 2021

“How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.” Behind that rebuttal Our Lord gave to the scribes’ charge that He was casting out demons “by the Prince of demons,” was the understanding that Beelzebul, or Satan, was a power that held human beings in thrall. And it is our OT reading today that explains how that came to be. It is the story of mankind’s Fall.

The first human community, however long ago it existed, understood its obligation to its Creator. God made the man and woman in His own likeness to be His companions. They were given just one simple command to obey, to demonstrate their loyalty to the One who put them in Paradise to enjoy the earth’s riches. They failed the test, the woman believing the serpent’s lies, and the man following her in her rebellion. The fault itself, tasting forbidden fruit, hardly compares with the heinous crimes we see men, and even some children, committing today. But that observation misses the point. For all I know, the story we read in the Bible may be a symbolic retelling of the actual wrong committed by the first members of our species. But if such is the case, it works. By presenting the first sin of mankind in a fairy-tale-like manner — deception by a talking snake suspended from a magical tree, the story reveals, with unmistakable clarity, what sin is: it is rebellion against the One who made us for Himself, a breaking of the friendship God extends to the creatures He made in his own image. Bad things must follow.

By turning away from God, Adam and Eve went over to the side of the serpent, whom the last book of the Bible, Revelation, portrays as a seven-headed dragon and identifies as the Devil. Satan was the rebellious cherub whom Michael the Archangel cast out of Heaven [Rev 12: 3-10], and with man and

woman's dissing their Creator, he now had human companions. God expelled Adam and Eve from His presence after they made their choice not to make their way with Him. It could not have been otherwise. While not abandoning mankind to eternal damnation, God allowed the Devil to become their lord for a season. Christ, in the Gospel of John calls him "the prince of this world" [Jn 14: 30].

I don't know whether you have noticed, but persons who shun religion altogether, persons who have gone totally secular, have a hard time calling anyone evil: for when we do identify someone as evil — Hitler, Charles Manson, even the fictitious "Hannibal the Carnival" — we are saying that he has given himself over to an unseen power. We resort to this explanation for a person's deeds when they evoke such horror that the usual circumstances of a bad childhood, mental illness, or falling in with bad company fail to account for them. A mysterious, supernatural force that overtakes someone defies all attempts at a scientific description of the malady.

Angels and demons are spirits. We do not see them, and they work in silence. If the former make themselves known, on an errand from God, it is in the beneficent form of a man — and seldom with wings outside of paintings. If demons reveal themselves, it is with a grotesque visage to frighten. But why would they do that when they intend to do serious mischief? The reality we try not to acknowledge is that the primordial rebellion of man against the Creator unleashed unseen forces that we cannot control, a wickedness that envelopes us when we forswear God's protection. There are varying degrees of its influence, from the tempting suggestion to outright possession, robbing a person of his or her will and holding him or her bound to do its evil bidding.

What is the Devil's work? That question is easy to answer: it is to destroy. The medieval scholastic definition of evil is that which tends toward nothingness. God is the source of all existence. We get our being from Him. Any movement away from Him is in the direction of nonbeing, toward nothingness. The Devil

and his imps, having despaired of gaining back their positions in Heaven, have no other motive now than to spoil things for the rest of us. They seek to destroy God's creation — all of it. They attempt to get us to follow them on the path to nothingness. Evil is a purely dissolving force. Even an adolescent has some understanding of this. When a boy declares that he is a Satanist, intending to shock his elders, he is saying that he is a nihilist, that he believes in nothing, holds no moral principles, and has nothing to live for. But in a youth, as you know, this is usually a plea for help, not a conviction.

Yet even in the story of the fall, there is the promise of redemption. In the curse on the serpent, God tells it that the offspring of the woman, whom we understand to be Christ, will bruise its head, while it shall bruise merely His heel [Gen 3: 15b]. And before God expels Adam and Eve from the Garden, He replaces their inadequate fig-leaf coverings with better garments of skin — an indication that He has not cast them aside forever.

Today's Gospel is a story of deliverance from the forces of evil unleashed by mankind's disobedience. And the deliverance of course comes by the Messiah, God's Eternal Son incarnate as David's Heir. Before the discussion begins between Jesus and His critics, Mark the Evangelist reports that "whenever the unclean spirits saw Him, they fell down before Him and cried out, 'You are the Son of God'" [Mk 3: 11]. What is it that occurs when Jesus delivers someone from a demon, a fallen angel whose only motive is to enslave, torment, and finally destroy a creature made in God's image? What occurs is this: the destructive spirit encounters the Lord of life, the One by whom God brought the heavens and the earth into existence, and by whom He also sustains them in their existence, preventing them from falling back into nothingness. Whom do you think will prove the stronger in this encounter between the Divine Son, who bears the fullness of God's Being and life, and the damned spirit, who wants to drag its host down the path toward nothingness? We have celebrated Easter with its affirmation that life

is stronger than death. The evil spirit must of course give way when the Lord of life appears.

But “the scribes who came down” to Galilee “from Jerusalem” put their own evil interpretation on this victory of the Son of God over the forces of destruction. “He is possessed by Beelzebul,” a name that means “master of the house,” the one who has possession. “By the Prince of demons [Jesus] casts out demons.”

In reply, Jesus points out the bad logic of His accusers. “How can Satan cast out Satan? A house divided against itself cannot stand.”

And then Jesus speaks of “the unpardonable sin,” which is blasphemy “against the Holy Ghost.” And what is that? you ask. It is the sin the scribes from Jerusalem committed. They called the work of God the work of the Devil. The Messiah was anointed with the Divine Spirit after His baptism in the Jordan. He was led by that Spirit in every part of His mission, and He performed all His miracles by its power. If one is going to credit Satan for Christ’s deliverance of men and women from bondage, for His rescue from the forces of destruction, what chance does one have of accepting that rescue himself? That is why blasphemy, or speaking, against the Holy Spirit, the power by which the Messiah works, is the unpardonable sin. It is the refusal of pardon, of salvation from the consequences of the Fall, of deliverance from the forces of destruction by attributing such deliverance to the one who binds souls. Such is a distortion that cannot be overcome, if someone is to persist in it. The message here is that we need to give up our pride and what it rests on, the illusion of self-sufficiency. Accept the deliverance; accept salvation from the forces that will overpower us if we attempt to resist them alone.

We heard the exhortation in today’s Psalm to “trust in the LORD, for with [Him] there is mercy, and with Him is plenteous redemption” [Ps 130: 7]. Accept God’s help, the help He gives through His Son. Such is the essence of the Christian message