

Sermon
7 Pentecost—Proper 11-A
July 19, 2020
St. Andrew's, Methuen
William Bradbury

Isaiah 44:6-8
Psalm 86:11-17
Romans 8:12-25
Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

Years ago, a 9-year-old member of my parish in North Carolina called me with a problem. She said sometimes when she was in bed and almost asleep, she'd see an evil face staring at her and it was scaring her. Her parents' attempts to assure her there wasn't really such a thing in the room were not working.

What would you tell her? What do you tell yourself when something evil scares you?

I guess it would depend on what you think evil is or isn't.

When things are going well this is an academic question, but in the middle of a pandemic, massive unemployment, and centuries long oppression of people of color, it becomes a live question. We are like the workers in the parable, **'Master Jesus, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?'**

Jesus answers, 'An enemy has done this.... "the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil".'

Those who grow up in our culture and are taught that the universe is only a material, physical reality, laugh at such talk. Of course, there's no such thing as the devil, they say. And if they're true to their worldview, they become functional atheists that act as if the universe is a cosmic accident in which stupid stuff somehow blindly produced rational beings who can experience beauty, truth and love. The case of a thorn tree producing figs.

Those from some other cultures are on the opposite extreme, seeing the devil behind every bush, causing every negative experience.

C. S Lewis warns against thinking of the devil as a cartoon figure who prances around in red tights with a pitchfork, whispering in your ear to commit sexual sins. Also, I agree with Lewis when he says, **"There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them."**

The New Testament, as you know, is written from within the worldview that Satan and his forces are involved in causing suffering in this world. Jesus is sent to overthrow the Satan, the Accuser, and has a 40-day encounter with it in the desert after his baptism. Then Jesus announces the arrival of the Realm of God and spends his ministry and his life fighting the effects of evil by forgiving sins, healing the sick, removing demons, which I think of as self-destructive thoughts that harm a person. **In movie terms, Jesus comes to liberate us from the power of the darkside.**

Saint Paul also lived within this worldview and so wrote to the church in Ephesus: "Put on the whole armor of God, **so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.** ¹² **For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."**

In the first decade of the 20th century, the well-educated and sophisticated assumed humankind was on the brink of solving all our problems, and then we wouldn't need superstitions like the Devil and God.

But after two world wars and especially in light of the murder of 6 million Jews and 4 million others by Nazi Germany, such idealistic thinking must be considered naive and dangerous. The holocaust wasn't just caused by a few bad apples, but by a whole nation mesmerized by the myth of Aryan and National Supremacy.

Early in his ascent to power in 1933 Hitler spoke often of his desire to support the churches. In one speech he said, "Christians ... stand at the head of [this country]... I pledge that I never will tie myself to parties who want to destroy Christianity .. We want to fill our culture again with the Christian spirit."

Lutheran Pastor Martin Niemoller initially supports the Nazi Party, but sees soon enough the evil behind the rhetoric, so he speaks out and from 1938-1945 is in concentration camps, Dachau among them.

Niemoller's famous poem is important, because it shows us how evil does its thing, in a nation or in a life: It starts by pretending it's only spreading light and truth, **so people will stay home and let the Nazis do their thing unopposed.**

Niemoller writes:

"First, they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out,
because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out,
because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out,

because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me,
and there was no one left to speak for me.”

So, what DO we do in the face of evil?

I want to suggest where we as followers of Christ need to start:
**Morning, noon, and night turn your attention, your inner awareness,
to Triune God made known in Jesus Christ, who is in your heart.**

Paul tells us in Romans today:

“For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear..., but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”

When we feel fear rising, our imagination tells us that there is nothing we can do, but hide in our fear. **But when we turn to the Risen Christ and in the power of the Spirit, cry out, “Abba, Father”,** our fear drains away and our courage rises.

So we remember throughout the day what Jesus tells us in John’s gospel: **“I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”**

In case you’re wondering: I shared with my young parishioner what I do when I wake up with a panic attack at 3 in the morning: I focus on the image of the risen Christ given in a vision to Mother Maria Faustina as a young nun in Poland in 1931. She had a local painter recreate that vision: it shows the Risen Christ with his right hand raised in blessing and red and blue light streaming out of his heart. I learned about Saint Faustina from the men who attend the catholic chapel in the prison in Concord. They face evil and fear every day, so they turn to Jesus: in prayer, Bible study, worship, and their community of faith.

Saint Faustina says that when the weeds grow too much and fear overwhelms, look on the image of Christ and pray: **“Jesus, I trust in you. Jesus, I trust in you. Jesus, I trust in you.”**