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Weekend of Sunday, March 10, 2019
1st Sunday in Lent/"People of the Passion"/Year C
Primary Text: Luke 4:1-13
Sermon Title: "The Manifestation of Evil"

Theme

*After being filled with the Holy Spirit at his baptism, Jesus is led in the wilderness. Through his responses to the temptations of the devil, he defines what it means to be called "the Son of God." Today we will discuss **Satan/the Devil**.*

Text

¹Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."

⁴Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

⁵Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." ⁸Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

⁹Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,'

¹¹and

'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

¹²Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

¹³When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Sermon

And so Lent begins. Actually, it began last Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, but as far as Sundays go, today is the First Sunday in Lent. And it begins as it always does, with Jesus at the beginning of his public ministry, being tempted in the desert.

This Lent I am preaching a series called "The People of the Passion" and each week we will focus in an individual or group of individuals who play a prominent role in the drama that is the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ. And allow me to remind you that some of what you will hear me say during this series are questions, answers, and comments that came from those attending the Thursday night and Sunday morning studies on the same topics. So let's begin.

This week we are focused on the devil, also known as Satan, and by several other names such as Lucifer, the Prince of darkness, Beelzebul, and the antichrist, among others.

What I am about to tell you will likely stir up your theology shaped by your attendance at Sunday School when you were a child. And that is because there are not that many lay folks who really think and fuss with big theological concepts like the devil and evil, sin and suffering, but I am going to make you think about it.

In order to make you think about it, I need to introduce two concepts. The first is *metaphor*.

Metaphor - A figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable.

Similar concepts are allegory, parable, analogy.

Allow me to give you a couple of examples:

There are two creation stories in the Bible; Genesis 1 which is the creation in seven days story; and Genesis 2 which is the more evolutionary story that includes God forming Adam out of the dust of the earth and Eve out of one of Adam's ribs. The story is credited to Moses, but he wasn't there. No one was there in either story, as people didn't come into the story until after everything else was created.

So the question you ought to be asking yourself is, "how did Moses know what happened?" And the right answer is that he was inspired to write the story that God alone could know. But Moses was a primitive man from a primitive time relatively speaking and God didn't answer every question he could have about creation and so God gave Moses the Genesis stories as *metaphor* for how God created.

"So pastor are you saying that the Bible is not true?" No, I am saying that with regard to the Genesis creation stories there is no way primitive Moses could possibly understand and capture in words the creativity of God if God explained it to Moses, and so God gave Moses a metaphor, a story of how God created. The importance of the story is not the literal truth but the metaphorical truth.

Now if you are a Biblical literalist, you are not alone. There are probably many in the Sanctuary right now. Does my personal understanding change my conceptualization or my belief in God? Not in the least. Let's move on to our subject of the day - the "Manifestation of Evil".

I think the devil in all its manifestations, including the serpent that showed up in the second creation story, are also metaphorical. Do you really think that Adam and Eve needed to be tempted by the serpent to do what God told them not to do? You know from your own experience that you are totally capable of making a similar mistake with or without a talking serpent.

In Genesis, we have this story of the Garden of Eden, which I posit is also a metaphor, where everything was perfect in our human mind's imagination. But I think a more logical story is that there were weeds in the Garden, and animals that ate each other, and volcanos and hurricanes and tornados. But none of that was evil. It was perfect creation.

And the reason I think so is because God created human beings as slightly lower than the angels (Psalm 8:4-6) or at least that is how we think of ourselves, and it makes sense because of all created things we have the most advanced brain capable of free will and the choice to love God back and live godly lives. That is something no other created thing is concerned about. And so when there is a tornado in Alabama, godly folks respond mercifully. Not because we have too, because we

don't have to. But godly folks know that it pleases God when we act mercifully as Jesus would.

"But pastor, the devil shows up in the Gospels many times. How can we not believe in it?" That is true. In fact, it is because of today's gospel reading, the temptation of Jesus, that I chose to make the devil the subject on this First Sunday in Lent.

In all of the Gospel stories of the temptation, Jesus is the only person present and there is nowhere in Gospels where it is said that Jesus told the Gospellers to "write this down." "How did they know that the temptation even took place to write it?" Jesus probably told them about his temptation and the tempter the devil – but Jesus also often used literary devices such as parables, metaphor, allegory to teach important lessons.

The second concept I want to introduce to you is "convenient."

**Convenient - Fitting in well with a person's needs, activities, and plans.
Involving little trouble or effort. Situated so as to allow easy access to**

In Matthew's version (Matthew 4:1-11) the temptation only began after Jesus fasted for forty days and nights in the wilderness. Have you ever been tempted and gave in? Of course you have. We all have. And to what do we ascribe temptation? Have you ever seen the devil, Satan, or any of his demons? I have not. But it is *convenient* to have a label to ascribe our sinfulness to. And by convenient, I don't necessarily mean that in a *pass the buck* kind of way, but in a *that helps to explain it* kind of way.

If Jesus, in his human nature, was going to do battle with principalities and religious professionals and go through crucifixion without invoking his godly nature, then he had better deal with the worst of human temptation as is possible. Did the devil physically manifest itself to Jesus and articulate the numerous temptations that we read about in scripture? I don't know, and it doesn't matter to me.

The point of the temptation story, which I am saying might be also be metaphorical, is that Jesus overcame great temptation. And those temptations put forth were always something that could be considered a good thing (i.e., turn something

useless like a stone into bread and feed the hungry; become the one and only power in the world and resolve all the world's problems; demonstrate that angels exist to protect us, etc). But If Jesus did any of those things he would have undone what his Heavenly Father did in creation, which was to give us free will to love God in response to God's great love for us.

The fact is, the devil and Satan only appear in the OT in a few places and where they appear the form of the word is a verb not a noun. You see in the Jewish tradition God's creative genius included light *and* dark; good *and* evil. The LORD created these things. There is no manifestation of evil. In Judaism there exists the concept of *yetzer hara* – the congenital inclination to do evil. You know this is true, but we metaphoricalize our own children. We see a new born baby and just get weird and say things like, "Oh isn't he or she perfect and sinless?" No! Have you been around a newborn? They are the most narcissistic creation of all. The whole world rotates around them – "I'm hungry; I'm tired; I need a change. I I I." Hopefully, when human beings grow and mature, we realize the world doesn't revolve around us and we get over ourselves, but that is learned behavior.

According to this Jewish concept of *yetzer hara*, there is no demonic force in the universe to blame our misdeeds on, but rather our own misuse of things we need to survive. So the need for food becomes gluttony; the need for sexual satisfaction becomes sexual abuse, etc. Food and sex are gifts from God, but then we misuse them and what God intended for good becomes a temptation to do evil; to sin.

So then the concept of a manifestation of evil, is really a New Testament, Christian concept. And as I already said, Jesus often spoke in parables and metaphors, perhaps that is how the concept of a manifestation of evil called the devil or Satan began – because it was a convenient way to speak of the trouble we all experience in human life. But I think to not take the blame for our own mistakes and sinfulness and blame it on something else is irresponsible. And that is why when we confessed our sins a few minutes ago, we said, "We confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves." "We" did it, not the devil.

Let's move on to the subject of evil and suffering for a few minutes. We often say that the destruction of life and property due to a tornado is *evil*, but tornados are part of God's good creation, so by definition a natural disaster or an "act of God" as we call them, cannot be evil. Same goes for tiger that mauls a person. Is a mauling

tiger evil? No, a tiger is a wild beast. That doesn't make the devastation of a tornado or tiger mauling desirable, but it doesn't make it evil either. So then, evil is only that which is opposed to God and causes the destruction of creation, is ruinous of human community, and destructive towards human beings. And so the only source of evil is human beings.

To take advantage of the devastation after something like a tornado, by looting, or gauging people for home repairs, or higher prices for food in short supply, is evil. So I acknowledge that evil exists, but the source of evil is human.

I also acknowledge that suffering exists. I have been to the hospital 9 times in the last two weeks. A member of our fellowship was suffering. But suffering has always existed because it is a part of God's creation. When suffering happens, we get to make the human decision to have compassion and involve ourselves. God gives us the capacity for healing and alleviating suffering. And when we choose to be involved, it pleases God.

But we can also choose to not get involved. This is the free will I spoke of earlier that God uniquely gives to human beings. But suffering in and of itself is not evil, but does give us the opportunity to be godly; Christ-like in our response to suffering. After all, suffering with others and for others was the hallmark of Jesus Christ.

Sin, evil, and suffering truly exists in many forms. And sometimes it is convenient to name it (i.e., Satan, the devil). But it would be sinful to not take responsibility for our own sinful actions and the evil it leads to and seek to blame others, real or metaphorical.

Now, this study evoked some questions and comments:

What about exorcisms? Are they real? An exorcism is a ritual performed by a priest to expel an evil spirit from a person. This ritual was made famous by the movie, "The Exorcist." All I can say is I have never met or seen and person who had an issue that could not be identified as a medical or psychological problem and treated by traditional means. However, they happened in Jesus' public ministry, but back then they had no other way to identify and heal like we do today. When I visit the troubled, sick, and dying, I use Chrism oil to anoint the forehead of the suffering

and pray for the end of their suffering and return to wellness in Jesus' name. So except for beds hopping up and down and spinning heads, I do exorcisms with much less drama. I have a question; why do only Catholics seek exorcism? Why don't demons afflict Lutherans?

"Do Ouija boards have any real spiritual power?" I doubt a thing manufactured by Hasbro has any real spiritual power. But without dishonoring the person asking the question, I think the wrong question is being asked. Rather than rely on so-called spirits – good or evil – to predict or answer your questions about the future, the better question to answer is "In whom or what do you entrust your future?" The Christian seeks not to know the future, but trusts his or her future in God alone.

"If there is no devil, and no hell, or consequences for sin, then what is the use of living a godly life?" Fair question. I did not say that the devil doesn't exist. In fact, I said that it is sometimes convenient to name sin, suffering, and evil as the devil. I also didn't say that hell doesn't exist. The consequence of sin is hell, but we don't have to wait to die to be there. When we involve ourselves in sin, we are already in hell, because hell is separation from God. But I also believe that there is a final and eternal destination for those who refuse to believe in God revealed in Jesus Christ, and scripture has named that place of separation, hell.

And about the question, "What's the use of living a godly life, if there are no consequences?" I have this to say. It's the wrong question. The right question is, "How do I live a life that honors the giver of my life with all its blessings?" When I focus the living of my life on that question, then I trust that God will reward me for my faith, not my good works or my bad works. Though I acknowledge that it pleases God when I do good works. And as a Christian, I want to please God.

And finally, one person responded to the study in an email saying how powerful and challenging the study was, and then added, and I paraphrase, "This makes Christ's sacrifice for me all the more powerful and significant. Christ went to the cross not simply because I needed rescued from the grasp of the devil, but because of God's great love for me."

Prayer

Almighty God, nothing compares to you. We devote our lives to your service in response to all the love you have shown us. Protect us this Lent and always from sin, suffering, and all forms of evil. And help us to grow closer to you. We pray this in the name of your son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen