

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

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We have spent this Epiphany season hearing about the Mission of Jesus, in small and large ways, both in the reaching out in healing to one individual and setting them free, to what Jesus understands as his proclamation and power ministry to every person, in every town and village and city of the People of God. And now we will be hearing of the obstacles to that mission, both attempted at Jesus, and much more successfully aimed at us.

O Lord, let your word only be spoken, and your word only be heard. Amen.

I preached a sermon several years ago on the reality of Satan. Mostly, I spent my time in the sermon referencing our perceptions of the devil, or you might say, the discernment of the devil's presence in some way.

But I did make the attempt, by scripture, especially the no-doubt-in-his-mind attitude of Jesus Christ, to the reality of angels, fallen angels, and thus what we've called demons (as does Paul), and all leading to an unequivocal acceptance of the Satan himself, who is, as you may remember, himself a fallen angel. Leader of the pack.

Through all the sermon I had quite a few people nodding their heads. For some of them my sermon was the invitation they needed from the leadership of the Body of Christ to acknowledge publicly – if the nodding of the head is public acknowledgment – their own perceptions, and discernment, and in many cases their experiences. Some were a little astonished. The only references that they had heard regarding demons and the devil was Flip Wilson, saying, “The devil made me do it!” in order to justify his unrighteous behavior as external forces, or somebody who they considered to be a CrazyKook Christian spouting two demons in every bush. But to hear acknowledgement from a rational – fairly rational – seminary trained episcopal priest was both alarming and refreshing.

One of those alarmed that day was a retired priest. I found that out when he started talking at the appointment he had made with me that week, saying he wanted to talk to me about my sermon. Frankly, I thought perhaps he was going to say that he appreciated preaching that was honest and open, and relied upon both the testimony of the bible and the Book of Common Prayer – which, by the way, also does not mince words about the reality of the devil.

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Alas, he was to tell me not only in that appointment but in another on the same kinds of issues of the supernatural of God, that he would appreciate it if I would not be so naïve, nor be so open and honest about my naiveté, and that talking like that against at least a 80 years of liberal biblical academic conclusion would only harm the spiritual growth of our progressive Christian faith systems (that's how he put it). And, of course, don't ever preach about Satan again in terms of personification.

I didn't want to ask him whether he believed the resurrection took place. So I simply asked him if he believed that there were angels. Yes, he said. And then he said, "But we don't have demons anymore."

Of course, that prompted me to want to ask the questions regarding scripture, and Prayer Book, and Morality, and Ethics, and hymnody, and Church, and the Holy Spirit, and, as well, the testimony of modern missionaries and contemporary experience in other parts of the Body of Christ.

I had a great respect for his very strong pastoral gifts, which seemed informed by a faith in God and Fellowship, which included his ability, when he was active as a vicar, to speak the tough word to parishioners when the tough needed to be spoken in matters of morals and ethics. With that in mind, I thanked him for sharing, and told him I would work at better communicating my understanding of the scripture (which I later found out from him he thought I was agreeing with him. I wasn't).

As I observed him in that parish I began to notice one thing of him, that he had his own "demons", if you will – and he would allow me to say that in that way – and that much of his underlying angst had to do with fear. It was the fear of death, both his, a relationship or two, and of the death of others close to him. He had chosen, in essence, to not be a party to trying to understand how Satan operated, as scripture pointed to Satan's work, of which I will talk about shortly. I love that guy, and I pray that – whether he ever deals with the topic of Satan in a teaching or preaching – he will accept the validity of the scripture, and come to accept the teaching and practice of Jesus in both Satan and demons as real and alive.

In my life as an Episcopalian (and I've "been an Episcopalian" from before my feet hit the ground at birth), I think I could safely say that 80%, perhaps more, of the ordained deacons and priests and bishops I have had the pleasure of knowing have acknowledged in some way the existence of Satan, or as he was known in heaven, Lucifer. Many of those would never bring that subject into the pulpit, however, and in my opinion, to the detriment of the faith and life of the people of God, as opposed to not talking about it altogether.

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I'm not going to try to prove anything to you this morning. But I'm going to turn to St Paul at this point. St. Paul, of all the apostles following the ascension of Jesus, talks about the reality of Satan and demons more than the others, and in terms of the Mission of God. Paul pointed clearly to the efforts of the devil to hamper, impede and barricade – even just delay – the spread of God's kingdom.

And so we, too, despite our supposed enlightenment, need to understand something of how Satan operates, which will ultimately be helpful in our prayers, in our discerning, as in the discernment of a new rector, and in our parish's overall mission for God.

First, I turn to the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 2, where the author points to the saving work of Jesus Christ as High Priest, both divine and mortal. The author wrote,

“¹⁴Since the children have flesh and blood, [Jesus] too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—¹⁵and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.””

I'm not a trained psychologist, but my pastoral ministry, and even my understanding of myself, tells me that most everything that is a trouble of our soul is of a nature of fear. And everything that causes us fear can be attributed to how we understand our own life and thus our death. Hear this clearly then: It is this fear of death that Satan attacks directly and indirectly, insidiously in our lives, in order to keep our eyes and minds and souls and spirits from the way of hope, and faith, and love! The devil makes use of that to get us off track from God, keep us off track, and even move in directions that rebel against God. I'm somewhat in agreement in that way with Flip Wilson. Just not in the way of abandoning my own responsibility for my sin, even if other causes can be seen.

So now let us turn to Paul's letter to the Ephesians to hear how Paul urges his disciples to Stand Firm. I encourage you to take on Ephesians 6:10-20 as a daily discipline, not just during Lent but constantly. And occasionally use it as an evaluation of your faith in Christ, to discern whether you are or are not standing firm in Christ, holding not to fear, but trust in God.

I want to read it to you with some commentary.

“¹⁰Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.”

We will not be able to stand in our own power. We absolutely must rely upon God and his strength and power. So this is an intentional choice, a matter of our

will in response to Paul's exhortation, almost command! - "be strong in the Lord..."
Going on,

"¹¹Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹²For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace."

These are the basics. They come from the prophet Isaiah, and Paul would be well aware of this, as the prophet spoke of the character and the nature of the coming Messiah. So these are the traits of the Messiah with which we are to armor ourselves – obviously not only a daily devotion, but a lifetime commitment of taking on Christ's truth, his righteousness, and his good news proclaimed.

"¹⁶In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

Our faith in Christ, our salvation given by Christ, and the might of the Spirit as found expounded in the bible, the word of God. In all of these you will find the battle between Jesus and Satan elaborated in the other Gospels besides Mark.

Finally, but still a major portion of the armor of God, Paul concludes,

"¹⁸And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people."

"Praying in the Spirit" is one of Paul's euphemisms for praying in tongues. But this is also about the nature of the Spirit-filled fellowship of all believers. So our armor is surely in the power of the Spirit as we turn to God in prayer, thus trusting – as Paul started – upon the power and strength of God, but also in the powerful nature of all the people of God, two or three at the minimum, linking arms together to Stand Firm. The power of Fellowship in the power of the Spirit is a definite deterrent to Satan's influence. It may not be the stop of it. So, Stand Firm, the way Jesus did.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.