First Sunday in Lent

Gen. 2:15-17; 3:1-7 Rom.5:12-19 Matt.4:1-11

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Andrew Lutheran Church March 1, 2020

One of my earliest images of the Devil, otherwise known as Satan, otherwise known as the power of evil, came from a little skit my mother taught my sister and me when we were children. Using just a little piece of black paper cut in the shape of a bow, she would create a scene involving a helpless woman who couldn't pay her rent *(I put the bow up to my hair)…* the mustachioed scoundrel named Dick who was preparing to tie her to the railroad tracks if she didn't pay up *(I put the bow under my nose),* and a handsome man in a bow tie who arrives just in time to save the day… *(I put the bow under my chin where a bow tie would be).* The skit goes like this…

*Dick (holding the bow under his nose to make a mustache)… "***You must pay the rent!"**

Woman (holding the bow in her hair)… **"But I can't pay the rent!"**

Dick…(mustache) **"But you must pay the rent!"**

Woman…(hair ribbon) **"But I can't pay the rent!"**

Handsome man (using the bow as a bow tie)… ***"I'll pay the rent!"***

Woman… (hair ribbon) ***"My hero!"***

When I was five years old, the combination of this merciless landlord and the detestable Captain Hook from my "Peter Pan" book seemed the perfect personification of the Devil to me… Later of course, characters like Darth Vader took over, and now there are any number of new movie characters who could be fine possibilities for the "Devil look-alike contest."

Whether disguised as "Dick the demon landlord," the evil Captain Hook, or the modern-day Darth Vader, what's nice about these characters is how easy they are to spot. You can tell from a long way away that they're up to no good, and you can just keep your distance…

Unlike the much more subtle and difficult-to-detect characterizations of Satan presented in the Bible…

Notice that Eve didn't run screaming from the serpent when he engaged her in conversation one day when the fruit was ripe and all seemed right with the world. She was apparently just as content to talk with him as with any other creature who might ask her the time of day. She even filled the serpent in on the details of the warning God had given against eating from **the tree of the knowledge of good and evil**, and listened thoughtfully to the points he made in his slick presentation on the benefits of eating from that particular tree… (Why, gaining in wisdom made all sorts of sense if one wanted to be able to be on the "right side" of important issues and decisions… if one wanted to be the one person in the room who knew "good" from "evil"….)

Jesus too, in his encounter with the Devil in the wilderness, found a guy who made total sense when it came to developing a "three-point program for successful Messiahs"… Undoubtedly it would be really advantageous for someone running for the "office of Messiah" if he **could make bread at the drop of a hat** (making it possible to feed the whole world)… or **bungie jump from the Sears Tower and come up smiling** (making it possible to respond to all sorts of calamitous situations in a "Superman" kind of way)… **or be crowned "king of the world"** (making it possible to set rules and makes laws that insured expediency and success without the annoying complications of human error and inefficiency, not to mention the messes created by willful children, abstract artists, and blues musicians).

What's so scary about the Biblical characterizations of the Evil One is not his big black mustache, the hook on his hand, or the cruel mask he wears over his deformed face… What's so scary about the Biblical characterization of the Evil One is how easily he fits into the landscape of everyday life, how rational and organized he sounds…

Rather like the little story about the day God and Satan were walking down the street together, and God bent down to pick something up that caught God's eye. God studied it, turned it slowly in all directions, gazing at it glowing radiantly in God's hand. Curious, Satan asked what it was.

"This," answered God, "is the truth."

"Let me have that," replied Satan, "and I'll organize it for you."

As much as we might like to pretend that if we're just nice enough, or careful enough, or smart enough, we can keep ourselves

from the enticements of the presence we call “Satan” or the power we call “evil,” it only takes a look at the newspaper or at the family reunion in the backyard or at the mirror to know that he is still very much with us… It only takes a glance to know that we are, all of us, separated from God, from one another, and from creation in some pretty significant ways… It only takes a glance to realize that evil still lurks behind the apple tree, waiting for a chance to cozy up to us with lines like, “Good morning, Friend… Boy, do I have a deal for you…”

On this first Sunday in Lent we take an honest look at the subtle presence of evil as presented in the temptation stories of Adam and Eve in the garden and Jesus in the wilderness. And among the many questions these stories raise, two seem most critical to address…

1) If Satan is so devious, so subtle, so rational-sounding, so smooth, so much a part of the landscape of our lives, how do we discern his ways from God’s ways?
2) How do we “arm ourselves” against the wiles of the Devil when we’re in the garden, or the wilderness, or in our own home towns?

The ancient desert mothers and fathers of the fourth century had a litmus test they used when considering whether something was of God or of Satan; a litmus test that was basically a careful pondering of these questions… “Does the idea presented to me make me feel superior or unaccountable to others in the community?”

“Does the idea I’m considering suggest that there are higher goals in life than love; like honor, self-fulfillment or vengeance?”

"Does the thing I'm leaning toward lead me to be judgmental of others?"

"If the goal of the Christian life is love," they suggested, "Then that which destroys love is by definition, not of God."

How different things might be in our world if in our decision-making we held up a picture of our families, our communities, our earth, the Cosmos, and asked, "Does the idea being considered strengthen the bonds of love between all concerned? Does the idea being considered take into account the well-being, the integrity, and the health of all, from the smallest snail to the tallest mountain to the most vulnerable among us?"

(I'm not saying that all decisions would be easy if we used these questions as a guide, mind you… Sometimes there are competing allegiances, and the way ahead is unclear, even when the litmus test of love posed by the desert mothers and fathers is used… Still, it seems we have forgotten to use this litmus test altogether… Think of the way a small number of people in our world hold so much of the world's wealth. Think of the ways we are complicit in systems that threaten the human rights of many of the Earth's people and lay waste to the world's resources. Think of the ways we all try to be "kings and queens of the mountain" in our own family and community relationships…)

Struggling with the subtle power of evil is no easy task… As Ephesians reminds us, in order to meet this challenge, we must "arm ourselves" against the "elemental powers of the universe." And so, in answer to the question, "How can I resist the power of evil?" I have packed a little bag with six things I think might help me in the struggle… (Perhaps we each might pack a different assortment of things, and

maybe it would be fun sometime to compare our choices…) As for me, I would pack…

A cow… Because on the day of my ordination, when everyone was giving me books of inspirational sayings and crystalline crosses, my friend Eleanor gave me a metal cow along with this bit of wisdom… "Keep your nose and your heart close to the earth Elaine, and you will make a good pastor. Remember that we often miss seeing God because we don't look low enough."

A horseshoe crab from the banks of the Bagaduce River… Because being one of the most ancient species in the animal kingdom, it reminds me of the interdependence of everything in the cosmos… It reminds me that the choices I make about how I live my life effect the rest of creation… It reminds me that as the moon shines on the horseshoe crabs in the river at night, so too the same moon shines on me, uniting us in one great constellation of mystery and beauty…

A photograph of cellist Vedran Smailovich, principal cellist of the Sarajevo Opera Orchestra, who in honor of the forty people who died from sniper fire during the Siege of Sarajevo while they were waiting in line for bread, played Albanoni's "Adagio in G Minor" every day for forty days in the very place where mothers and fathers and children were gunned down… Each day Vedran Smailovich setting up his chair in that place and playing his cello as each day more members of the orchestra joined him… This photograph reminding me of the power of beauty in the midst of death and destruction and the possibility that something of beauty and hope can rise even in places that seem utterly God forsaken… Reminding me also of the power of one individual to make a difference…

A mirror… It's important for me, when I'm keeping my eyes open for the "evil one" lurking behind the tree, to remember that evil also

lurks in me. Satan is not just "out there" somewhere, but lives very happily inside Elaine, just waiting for a chance to entice me to take my place on the top of the mountain and to declare myself queen. (Martin Luther understood the propensity of the Devil to find a place inside each of our hearts, and so ended both is morning and evening prayers with the line, "Let your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me.") Even while I peer around the apple tree for that crafty little Devil, the mirror reminds me that he holds me in bondage in ways I can't even recognize. Knowing this to be true makes it harder for me to point the finger at others in judgment.

A Church Directory… We can't fight the fight alone, dear brothers and sisters in Christ. Defying the power of evil is not a solitary activity. We need to challenge one another when we start acting like queens or kings of the mountain and to strengthen one another when we're weak in faith and courage and hope…

A name tag that declares me to be a beloved child of God… This undoubtedly is the most important thing to put in my "Devil Defying Bag"… The reminder that my identity is forever set in the merciful, loving arms of God. If I can only learn to trust this love and to root myself in this grace, then I no longer need to prove my status on top of the mountain. And I might even be able to tell Satan that his "great deals" no longer interest me, in as much as I have all the treasure and meaning I need in the embrace of God's love.

I think this is what Jesus went armed with when he went into the desert for forty days and found himself up against the temptations of Satan… I think he went into that wilderness place with the sound of God's claiming word of love spoken at his baptism: "This is my beloved Son"… and it was all he needed to see him through… the reminder of the love which promised to hold him through the valley of the shadow

of death, through the finality of the grave and into the eternal embrace of God.

And the wonderful amazing thing is that we too have just been reminded of the same thing on Ash Wednesday. For in the ashes that speak of death we have been marked with the sign of love so strong upon our brow + it defies anything Satan could deal us… the sign that says, "There is nothing that can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus… nothing."

Dear Friends, there is no doubt that evil is a formidable presence in our world, waiting for an opportunity to organize what is beautiful, to justify what is profitable, and to tempt us always to name ourselves as king or queen of the mountain. But the good news is that we have a God who has dealt with evil before us, who knows the temptation, who whispers hints and guesses in our hearts about there being a different way, and who accompanies us on our journey….

So, on this first Sunday of Lent, I encourage us all to think about what we might pack for the journey to keep us steadfast in God's love and in God's way of being in the world… If you were to pack six things in your "Devil Defying Bag," what would they be?

God grant us the wisdom to pack the things that speak of love, the courage to use them, and the grace to keep our noses close to the ground, where, looking low enough, we will find Emmanuel God with us through it all…