

Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church

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ANGELS AND DEVILS

Luke 4: 1-13

Some years ago Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson and some good ole Texas boys began singing what they called “Outlaw Country.” Now one of those good ole boys was Billy Joe Shaver from Waco. You know he’s a good ole boy because of that name: “Billy Joe.” He wrote a classic “Outlaw Country” song about giving in to temptation. This is the key verse: “The devil made me do it the first time, the second time I did it on my own.” That’s called splitting the difference, giving the devil his due and then owning the rest.

Now the Bible is filled with devils and angels. These supra-human beings appear in the temptation story of Jesus. So what are we to do with these supra-human beings? Well, there are many ways to interpret the Bible’s language about

the devil or Satan. Consider what we would call the left, middle, and right-wing positions.

The left wing is anchored by Rudolf Bultmann. This German New Testament scholar said that the Bible's talk of the devil was part of the dualistic mythology of the First Century. According to Bultmann, contemporary readers can make no sense of a personal devil fighting against God. Such language needs to be de-mythologized and reinterpreted using Existentialist terminology. Thus, contemporary readers understand human caused evil, but there are no devils, demons or Satan. Period. The left wing.

Now the middle position is anchored by Paul Tillich, yet another German theologian. Tillich used the word "demonic" often in his theology. But he defined the demonic as "the claim of anything finite to be infinite in its own right." Tillich saw the demonic to be human sin writ large in society. Like personal greed that becomes embedded in a cut-throat economic system. The middle position.

The right wing is anchored by C.S. Lewis. His book **The Screwtape Letters** was written during World War II, a time of immense evil launched by the Third Reich. Lewis wrote the following about his views: “There are two opposite errors about devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe they exist and then have an excessive and unhealthy obsession with them.”

Though Lewis believed quite literally in the existence of the devil, he was convinced the devil is not a power opposite to God, but a power opposing the archangel Michael. Interestingly, Lewis wished he had written another book to balance *The Screwtape Letters*, a book about Michael giving advice to our guardian angels for our encouragement. So that is the right-wing position.

Now if none of those options work for you, no worries. I have others. In our time the New Testament scholar Walker Wink wrote a trilogy of books about evil. In **Naming the Powers** (1984), **Unmasking the Powers** (1986) and **Engaging the Powers** (1992) Wink mirrors Tillich’s view that

the demonic is human evil writ large. He defines the “principalities and powers” in the Ephesian letter as both visible and invisible forces of evil. Remember how Ephesians 6 phrases it: “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, authorities, cosmic powers of this present darkness, against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” Wink suggests these invisible forces become quite visible and toxic in corporate cultures and popular prejudices. These principalities and powers become embodied in systems and structures of evil. Think of drug cartels.

Or consider Elaine Pagels who wrote the 1995 classic entitled **The Origin of Satan**. One of her reasons for writing this book came from suffering two devastating losses. In 1987 her six-year-old son died of a rare disease. The next year her husband of twenty years died tragically in a mountain climbing accident. As part of her self-therapy, she wondered how people deal with such loss.

Pagels found that getting angry at God made no sense to her. But she took comfort in the fact that some Christians in the early church raged against Satan. That she could understand since Satan was the presumed source of so much evil and suffering in the world. Pagels notes that “liberal Christians would say the devil is irrelevant. But that is not so. The dramatic tension of the whole Jesus story would not work without this devil figure.” Especially the Temptation story and the exorcism scenes.

So this is how Pagels came to understand Satan. She interprets the figure of Satan as the instigator of suffering and those who cause suffering. Those with whom we are angry for causing suffering we demonize and call them “Satanic”. I, for one, am quite willing to call Vladimir Putin “Satanic” for the suffering he has unleashed upon Ukraine.

So if you don’t like any of those options, no problem. I have more. In Karl Jung’s depth psychology, the devil becomes the shadow side of ourselves. For Jung, the devil is just the internal dark shadow of evil tempting all of us, evil

writ small within. In the movie “Jesus of Nazareth” Franco Zeffirelli offers a magnificent picture of the temptation scene. What Jesus rebukes is his own dark shadow cast on a moonlit night. That’s Jungian psychology at its best.

Now perhaps you are more into the twelfth chapter of the Book of Revelation, the story of Michael expelling Lucifer from heaven. Maybe John Milton in **Paradise Lost** was right all along. Did Lucifer rise up in heaven and cry out, “I would rather rule in hell than serve in heaven”?

Maybe your prefer the first two chapters of the book of Job where Satan is a cynical District Attorney who insists that Job is righteous because of the perks-the blessings. Remove the perks and he will curse God. So this Satan sees a dark cloud behind every silver lining. Satan the accuser.

Or maybe the devil is just the “Zeitgeist”. That’s a fancy German word that means “the spirit of the times”. All the hurtful ideologies, the cultural prejudices, the poisoned political posturing. Well, the list of possibilities for understanding Satan or the devil is quite long. This list would

be incomplete if I did not mention the opinion of a good friend of mine. He is quite convinced that the singer Madonna is the devil incarnate.

Well, I am sorry I cannot answer this question for you. Truthfully, I am still wrestling with all these possibilities after all these years. But I do think that Elaine Pagels is right that the dramatic tension in the Jesus story would not work without the devil. Consider the Temptation story as well as all the exorcisms of demons. It's all there in the Jesus story and thus you are called to interpret what you have read. What will you do with the devil, Satan and the demons?

For me, the more important question is this: Are we to see our own lives involving a profound struggle between good and evil, light and darkness, right and wrong? That is easy for me to answer. Of course, our lives are caught up in that struggle-both within our own hearts and in our dealings with others. And with the world, especially now in these deeply divisive times where truth and falsehood are locked

in a fierce struggle. Is that evidence that the Deceiver, the Father of Lies, is at work among us?.

So how should we visual our struggle? Are we to imagine an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other? Should we say, “The devil made me do it the first time, the second time I did it on my own”? Or should we say with the letter of James, “But one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it”? (James 1: 14) To put it another way, maybe most of our troubles are self-inflicted; our own desires become the demons lurking within. We bedevil ourselves.

Now when we consider the Temptation story itself, we discover how even good things can become a source of temptation. The Tempter becomes the Deceiver so that good things become twisted and distorted. Like bread, which we pray for daily. Our power, which can be used for constructive purposes. Or glory, the glory of God, the ultimate good. All these “goods” became subject to temptations for Jesus, who was alone and hungry in the wilderness. Stark evil is never

attractive, but the “good entwined in evil” can be quite alluring. Like quoting Scripture with evil intent. Finally, however, Jesus resists those temptations by appealing to the highest good-God alone. The One who insists that all lesser goods be surrendered in order to “worship the Lord your God and serve only him.”

So I want to end with some good news this morning. At the end of our text we read: “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from Jesus until an opportune time.” Now Matthew and Mark have a better ending. They say, “The devil left him and behold angels came and ministered to him.” Angels came and comforted Jesus. I wonder if they brought him bread to eat. After all, he had fasted for forty days and was famished. In my mind, I see Jesus in the wilderness breaking bread with his angelic companions. Just as Abraham and Sarah shared bread with those three angelic visitors under the Oaks of Mamre (Gen 18).

And this is the really good news of the temptation story. In the words of Abraham Lincoln, “the better angels of our

nature” triumphed. The three demonic temptations were rebuffed and the devil departed, while angels gathered around Jesus.

Remember this. The devil quotes from Psalm 91: “God will command his angels concerning you to protect you. On their hands they will bear you up so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” While the devil twisted those good words to tempt Jesus to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple, let’s remember how those words were intended. To give us courage and hope in dark times. To remember in the difficult moments that angels of which we are often unaware will bear us up in their loving arms. With their amazing grace, they hold us tenderly amidst the turbulence and the sorrow. “Behold, angels came and ministered to him.” May they comfort you as well on your Lenten journey. May it be so. Amen.