

“Born . . . not of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13)

A sermon for the Sunday before Epiphany

Ephesians 3:1-12

Every day it is a little lighter. In a few days, January 6th, it will be Epiphany, the coming of the light. Epiphany is a minor festival for those of us in the Western Church, even though for those in the Eastern Church (three hundred million of them), Epiphany is the most important celebration next to Easter. We forget that what we call Christmas did not become a holiday in the Western Church until 336 A.D., more than three hundred years after Christ died and rose again.

What is Epiphany?

When we talk about light and darkness, we know in physics that light is simply that which overcomes darkness. Darkness is simply not having enough light. The same with cold and heat. It's just a physical thing.

We have to realize, without going into a lot about ancient religion, that it's really about good and evil. For us the problem today is that among us evil isn't really real. This denial of evil shows itself in two ways.

The first way is the blank slate idea, that is, when we're born we're blank slates. We can call that being innocent, but it is surely not good and evil. What is said by most people is that everything is basically good. It amounts to saying that evil is only evil if you think it's evil. We see this expressed in many ways.

Fifty years ago there was a movement called Transactional Analysis, whose motto was: "I'm O.K., you're O.K." Today, of course, we have the idea that God is nice, we are nice, isn't that nice. After all, it's just how you think about it.

In a larger way this is what Buddhism is about. Buddhism is basically atheism. It's all a matter of your thinking. Modern psychologists talk about reframing a problem; it's all a matter of how you think. There's no real evil.

Then we have the computer world of virtual reality. Someone has said that evil is just the shadow side of the good. It is a matter of how you think about it. Just so you manage it. That's the blank slate understanding.

The second way is the tower of Babel. In Genesis 11 they build a tower to reach into heaven so that then they can get God under control. In short, there's no real evil

but there is incompleteness. There is finitude. We haven't been able to control everything yet. But we will. But for now we can put God in those places we haven't figured out yet. That's called the god of the gaps, but as we fill in the gaps, we, like the Tower of Babel, will take care of heaven.

Think of the progress we've had. Small pox was terrible. It killed 30% of the people who got it. In a similar way polio was devastating. Yet it has been wiped out except for some places in Asia. We make progress in many ways.

If you go to the self-help section of book stores, there are literally thousands of books on how to fix all kinds of problems. If you go online, there is no end to the YouTube videos that show you how to fix something and solve problems of all kinds.

Mark Twain famously said: "History doesn't repeat itself but human nature remains the same." To that some say: "Then we will change human nature." Harvard professor Steven Pinker wrote a book in which he claimed we are solving problems today that seemed impossible to solve only a few years ago. The book is greatly disputed.

But there is a minority report to those two ways of thinking, although they represent what many people today just assume is the case, either the blank slate or the Tower of Babel reaching into heaven itself.

What does the minority report say? A professor, Martin Seligman, who for many years was head of the American Psychological Association, wrote an article in the *Washington Post* a few years ago. He is a specialist in abnormal psychology. He's not a Christian and probably not even religious. Yet he wrote: "There's a difference between being crazy and being evil. One can be crazy. One can be evil. One can be neither. One can be both. But the label 'evil' is not mysterious and not derived from a belief in the Devil." In other words, it's not all psychological. Evil is real.

We've had a wake-up call in our society. Many have had relatives who served in World War II. This war really went from 1914 to 1945. Someone has called World Wars I and II the Thirty-One Years War, a play on the Thirty Years War, 1618-1648. Before this Thirty-One Years War, ideas of progress and optimism were widespread. But World War I blew that apart.

Then came Stalin, who was directly responsible for at least forty million deaths and probably many more. Then came Mao, who was responsible for at least sixty

million deaths and probably a hundred million. Then there were a couple of million slaughtered in Cambodia, and the list goes on. Pretty soon we have to ask: What about evil?

Recall the Nineteenth Century French poet Charles Baudelaire, who wrote that the Devil's first trick is to convince us that he doesn't exist.

In the Twentieth Century C. S. Lewis, who is most well-known as the author of *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, also wrote an even more important book, *The Screwtape Letters*, in which a senior devil coaches a junior devil on how to entrap people. When someone suggested to Lewis that he write a second volume of such letters, he said he just couldn't; it was too draining writing about evil.

What our text basically says is: Something new has come. Something that was not there before. This newness makes all the difference.

What is the New Testament saying? First of all, Mark 2:17: "Only sinners can be saved." Only those who are ill need a physician. If you're not a sinner, no salvation.

In Romans 3:9-20 Paul writes about being under the power of sin. Twelve verses are too long to read now, but we will read two of them: "None is righteous, no not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one."

As Mark Twain wrote: "It's not the verses in the Bible I don't understand that bother me, it's the ones I do understand!" There's really no lack of clarity here: "None is righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10).

"Well," we say, "we have to discuss that. After all, we're innocent until proven guilty. We hold to the presumption of innocence. After all, God, if you're going to judge me, then I will judge you!" When we say these things out loud, we realize how ridiculous they are, and yet that's the way we think.

We see this thinking when we sing the well-loved hymn, "Amazing Grace." You know how it goes: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saves a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found; Was blind, but now I see." People sing it with gusto, but they think of some wretch over there. They don't really think they are wretches. They don't think of themselves as lost. They think: "I'm not perfect. I'm not blind. I know what's going on. Those people over there are big problem, but not me."

It's all settled by one thing: the cross. That's what this passage in Ephesians 3:1-12 is talking about: The cross says evil is real, and it's so real that when God saw it, he solved it this way in spite of us. It wasn't something that we could handle.

We think: The cross was like a charade, a drama God put on for us to show us that he loved us. Or it was all an idea, and if we just hold that idea in our heads, then that's it.

But the confession of the Christian Church is: This is what God has done; this is what God is doing here now in the sacrament. This is his body and his blood "for you."

The Christian Church spent four hundred years dealing with the question of Christ until finally in 529 A.D. the Second Synod of Orange defined that sin is real, sin is basic.

In the Prologue to the Gospel of John this is spelled out. John 1:5: "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not understand it and doesn't overcome it." It goes on in John 1:9-11: "The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. . . . yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not." Then John 1:13: ". . . who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."

In spite of us. We are caught in this real problem called sin, death and evil, and it's not just how we think about it, and it's not something we can handle. God has done it and that makes all the difference. Amen