

Satan

A sermon for the season of Lent

This week the protagonist we are focusing on is Satan himself. We recall that at the Last Supper Jesus dipped a morsel of bread, gave it to Judas, and then Satan entered Judas (John 13:27). Satan was very much a part of what was going on.

What do we know about Satan? The Old Testament actually has very few references to Satan. There is the talking snake in Genesis 3:1-6 at the fall into sin. Then in an entirely different kind of account Saul lost his kingship; he went to the witch of Endor (1 Samuel 28:3-25). To consult a sorcerer was forbidden. Dealing with evil spirits was part of the pagan religions of that time, and Saul was adopting these practices. Then in Job 1:6 it says Satan is up there in heaven among the sons of God. Satan asks the Lord: How do you know Job is faithful to you? It also says in Zacariah 3:1 that Satan is in heaven as the accuser.

The New Testament is quite different. The first three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, have Jesus in continual battle with Satan. Mark has a brief reference to the temptation at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. In Matthew 4 and Luke 4 Jesus is taken up to a high mountain, taken up to the pinnacle of the temple. Satan is portrayed as a debating partner, quoting Scripture. As Shakespeare writes in *The Merchant of Venice*: "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose." But, of course, the real question is "how" to use Scripture.

The first three Gospels, especially Mark, present Jesus as the stronger man over against this opponent. In Luke the disciples come to Jesus and say: "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" And he says to them: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" (Luke 10:17-18). In the Gospel of John at the Last Supper Satan enters into Judas (John 13:27), but there are no exorcisms in John as in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Luther frequently used 2 Cor 11:14: "Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light." When we translate "angel of light" back into Latin, it is "Lucifer," another name for Satan. In Mark 5 Jesus heals a man possessed by demons. Jesus asks the demon: "What is your name? He replied: "My name is Legion; for we are many" (Mark 5:9).

In 1 Peter 5:8 is the warning: "Be sober. Be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour."

In the Book of Revelation there is for the first time a specific description of where Satan came from and what happened. Most of the time the Bible is not concerned about the origin of evil. The Bible is concerned with the “that” of the situation, the “that” of the evil one. Only in one place, in Revelation 12:7-10, is there a description of the origin of evil. There is a great battle in which Michael and his angels fight the great dragon and his angels. The text states: “And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.” (Rev 12:9). Other than these verses, the origin of evil is not a concern in the Bible. (Isaiah 14:29 states: “for from the serpent’s root will come forth an adder,” but this reference could be just describing the King of Babylon and his fall.)

In Zoroastrianism evil is the opponent of the light. In Manicheanism there are two evil forces forever fighting. In the Faust legend, which is only about five hundred years old, there is someone selling his future, his life, to the evil one. Does the evil one have a cleft foot, a tail? Does he wear a red suit? What is the devil like? Our imaginations go far beyond what we can say for sure. The only thing for sure is that in Scripture he is called “the father of lies” (John 8:44). That is his one power.

C. S. Lewis’s great book, *Screwtape Letters*, describes how a senior devil coaches a junior devil. And then there is Denis de Rougemont’s book, *The Devil’s Share*, in which the Devil is described as having three tricks: 1) to convince you he doesn’t exist because then he has a free hand, 2) to say the devil is over there incarnate, for example in Hitler, and if we destroy Hitler, we destroy evil and that problem is solved, and 3) the devil is in this or that, a distraction, all over the place, in my back or the car’s engine. But finally de Rougemont writes: Where will you find the devil? In the chair you are sitting in. That is where the devil is.

We have to be careful in talking about the evil one in these personified ways because people may say: “The devil is all just mythology.” And we know the dangers of referring to everything as mythology. On the other hand, as happened in the Middle Ages, the thinkers said: “The devil exists, and anything that exists has to be created by God, therefore there must be some good in him.” That is another devilish way of thinking.

We do not know the origin of evil. We know that there is evil, that it has a personal quality, and that it is very dangerous for us. How do we know that? In the Small Catechism Luther writes: “My Lord . . . has delivered me and freed me from all sin,

from death, and from the power of the devil" (Second Article of the Creed). They are all the same thing – sin, death, and the power of the devil.

In 1 Cor 15:58 Paul writes: "The sting of death is sin." The sting means the scorpion's tail that causes death. It is sin that creates death. Then in Hebrews 2:14 it says: "He himself likewise partook of the same nature that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage." Sin, death, and the devil are all the same thing.

Heiko Oberman in his book, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, captures all this. The key to understanding Luther is that Luther saw the battle between the Lord Jesus Christ (God himself) and this evil – "sin, death, and the devil," –and that these were defeated by Jesus Christ through God's power on the cross.

What are we to do? Do we try to exorcise the devil? Luther said one could laugh at the devil, or quote Scripture against the devil, or seek the company of fellow believers so one is not caught alone by the devil, or hold a cross, especially one made of silver or gold.

Even though Luther talked about such ways to ward off the devil, he also wrote that these ways do not work because as soon as we think we know how to deal with the devil, we are caught in spiritual pride. When we see we are caught in spiritual pride, we then fall into spiritual despair, which is the other side of spiritual pride. The devil catches us no matter what. We are helpless because there is no way for us to deal with Satan.

We even deceive ourselves. Luther often quoted Isaiah 64:6: "All our **righteous** deeds are filthy rags." That is an EGO moment: Eyes Glaze Over. That cannot be! My good deeds, our good deeds, must count for something! Then we are caught in spiritual pride.

Luther describes *Anfechtung*, which in this context means an attack of the devil. Paul describes *Anfechtung* in Romans 5:3. The RSV says: "We have these sufferings." An earlier translation has "tribulations." We are caught by these continual attacks of the evil one.

Does that mean we are helpless? The fact is without Christ we are helpless. It is important to remind ourselves that our only help is in Christ and the cross. That is true in the cosmic sense, in the big picture. Because God saw that we have this

problem of "sin, death, and the devil," he came and handled it his way, and we cannot second guess that. We just know that that is what he did. And it is finished (John 19:30). It is done, and for those in Jesus Christ the Last Judgment is over.

It is also true in our daily lives. We are attacked all the time, in every way, from every direction by the evil one. What can we do? We can return every day to our baptism in which the Lord has snatched us from the jaws of the devil and made us his own (Large Catechism, Baptism 4:83). As Paul writes: "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Romans 6:5). Everything else has to be seen as secondary. Christ is our only hope, and he is a sure hope, "a living hope" (1 Peter 1:3). Through him we are "more than conquerors" (Romans 8:37). Amen