

See no Evil, Hear no Evil, Speak no Evil

Mark 1: 9-15

“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.” Mark 1: 12

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Atlanta, Georgia
March 5, 2006

“I went to the woods,” wrote Henry David Thoreau in Walden’s Pond,
“because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life,
and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and, not, when I came to die,
discover that I had not lived.”

Mark’s gospel tells us that Jesus went to the wilderness, not because of any wish of his, but because he was driven there by the Spirit. The wilderness into which Jesus was driven was likely the desert south of the city of Jericho, that place where the Jordan River runs into the Dead Sea. I have been there. Actually, I rode through the desert there in 1994 on an air conditioned bus in the company of jolly good companions, but even from my cushioned seat, I could sense that the landscape was friend to neither man nor beast. The sun was brutal. The hills were rocky and barren, the shrubs wind- beaten, no shelter anywhere in sight.

Thoreau chose to go into the wilderness to learn the essential facts of life. The Spirit of the Living God drove Jesus into the wilderness for exactly the same reason: so he could learn the essential facts of life. I know that it is

hard to believe that God would send him there – a place of trial, a place of suffering, a place of endless temptation. The great irony of it has to do with the timing. The Spirit of God had just descended upon Jesus like a dove on the day of his baptism. You couldn't ask for a better symbol than the dove. It is was dove that Noah sent out after the flood and returned with the freshly plucked olive leaf in his mouth, meaning that the waters had subsided finally from the earth. In book of Genesis, the dove is a sign that the ordeal is over, and the time of hope and promise has begun. In Mark's gospel, it is exactly the opposite. When the dove descends, you had better run for cover. Before Jesus' clothes were even dry from his submersion in the Jordan River, the same Spirit who anointed him turned into a dark, daunting force to whom even the beloved son had to submit. For forty days, Jesus stayed in the wilderness contending with temptation.

So quickly he had moved from the ecstasy of coming up out of the waters of the Jordan, and hearing the voice saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved." You've won the gold. You are the gold. You are one like whom there has never been anyone else. There will never be anyone like you again. You are the designated one.

Then, immediately, the contest with Satan, the embodiment of evil, began. It was no accident that it happened so quickly after the moment of

spiritual triumph, when Jesus knew exactly who he was and sensed a power he had never known before. At moments like that, it is tempting to forget who you are and who the source of your power really is. If it was tempting for Jesus, the Son of God, to forget, imagine how tempting it is for the rest of us mortals.

Mark does not tell us the specific nature of the temptations that Jesus experienced as Matthew and Luke do, but it would be safe to assume that they were real and that they involved the betrayal of God and self. Temptations are those forces that would persuade us to betray the best that we know. They tell us that we have every right to do what we want to do, to gratify what we need have. They keep us from caring whether our actions or inactions cause hurt and suffering to others. How do they do it? By speaking in that persuasive little voice, that says,

“You’re right! Forget about what the other people say!”

“Haven’t they hurt your feelings?”

“Didn’t bad things happen to you when you were little?”

“If they are up, won’t you be down?”

“If they get theirs, doesn’t that mean you won’t get yours?”

And so you are justified in doing whatever it is you feel as if you need to do.

Then, there is the other voice that feels no need to justify anything. It sits on your shoulder and whispers in your ear, “Just go on and do what you want to. Do what you feel like. Who cares?”

Some years ago, I read an autobiographical piece written by a distinguished minister, a memory from his boyhood: “One Easter morning, I went out into the yard and saw a robin perched on the clothes line. Without a thought, I rushed back into the house to get my brother’s slingshot and rushed back out to find to my delight that the robin was still there. I took aim and shot. The bird fell at my feet. I instantly felt remorse, though my answer to why I killed the robin was just this: I did it for the hell of it. I did it because I could. I have come to see as a man that my action was the outward and visible sign of my inward and spiritual reality that I am a card-carrying member of the fallen human race. I knew better, but I did it anyway.” (1)

Our forty-day trek through the early spring to Easter is called Lent. It is the time for confronting the essential facts of our lives, one of which is that we are all members of the fallen human race. Remember those three monkeys, who put their hands over eyes and over their ears and over their mouths – see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil? I think those monkeys

were mocking us, they were trying to show us how ridiculous it is to pretend that any of us can avoid evil in this life. (2)

A Catholic monk writes of a morning in which he saw the truth about himself. His monastery is in the desert. “I like coffee,” he writes. “It helps me. The older I get, the more I need my coffee. I was worried that day about not having enough of spending the morning feeling dull and weak and so, without even thinking about it, I went to the kitchen at the monastery and drank up all the coffee that was left. Years later, I think of the shame of the ease with which I did that – the black, bitter remains. It seems a tiny thing and yet in that cup of coffee taken and not shared, that is the root of the evil that disturbs us, the poison of all the arrogance which selfishness and the need to control create. Jesus would have left the coffee for his brothers. I drank it all myself.”(3)

Here is the question. What does Jesus have to teach us today? What can we learn from him? That evil is real, and if Satan, the personification of evil, was after him, Satan most certainly will be after us. We can learn to see evil for what it is, when we encounter it within our own souls and when we see around us, operative in every aspect of human society, including bodies of state, economic systems, and religious institutions, and anything else you can name. When the Bible says all have

sinned and fallen short, it means all –very individual, even the very best person you know. It means every aspect of our life together.

Think of the Constitution of the United States. It is the apogee of democratic thought, protecting freedoms and holding a diverse republic together by its prescriptions of the orderly exercise of power, but the Constitution, when it was written, did not protect the rights of African Americans or Native Americans. It did not allow women to vote.

Think of global capitalism, which has the potential of bringing millions of people out of abject poverty and enabling them to lives of dignity, but, in effect, it is widening the chasm between the rich and the poor.

Think of our nation, post 9/11, and how tempting it has been for some to turn a blind eye to the torture of prisoners.

Think of the history of the Christian religion and how, across the centuries, it has been such a compelling force good in the world, offering hope to the despairing and creating pathways to peace and harmony, but think of how the church has also been a tool for evil: the Crusades of the 11th century; the justification of slavery by much of the white southern church in this country in the 19th century; the unholy alliance of parts of the Christian church in Germany during the Nazi in the 20th century; the collusion between the

Dutch Reformed church and the apartheid government of South Africa. The list is endless. In every time and place, the church is tempted to bless the status quo, to turn as deaf ear to those who are oppressed, to ignore injustice, to keep silent when it should speak.

In the book of Genesis, the story of Cain and Abel is told. Cain is envious of the favor his brother found before God. The Lord said to Cain, “If you do well, will you not be accepted by me: And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.” (4:7)

Cain didn’t master it; Jesus did. Day after day, he confronted himself and his demons. What does Mark tell us? That he was with the wild beasts.

You have your beasts, I have mine, the Lord wrestled with his. Surely one of them was the beast of self-deceit, which, when it gains victory over us, allows us to conclude that the rules of decency might apply to other people but not to us. Robert Coles studied the phenomenon of white supremacy in the 1960’s and people who committed what today are called hate crimes. In virtually every instance, the people who planned the crimes genuinely felt justified. He wrote in his book, *Children of Crisis*, “We must all know the animal in us can be elaborately rationalized in a society until an act of murder is called self-defense, and dynamited houses become evidence of moral courage.” (4)

Jesus did not allow himself to be fooled by the beasts, thus making it clear that while being tempted by Satan is inevitable, yielding to Satan is not. Day by day, it takes honesty and prayer to withstand the subtle ways of the spirit of evil. It takes clinging for dear life to your God-given identity. A baptized child of God doesn't have to sell his soul or betray the best she knows. These are hard lessons to learn, but they are essential to human existence. Remember, it was God who drove Jesus into the wilderness. He had to go there if he was to go every place we have to go, and that was the whole point of his coming among us. What use would he have been if he had said to us members of the fallen human race, "I'll go to the mountaintops with you, but I am not doing valleys. I stand by you in good times, but when the winds howl and there is no shelter from the sun, I'll be on the air-conditioned bus." As it was, he went into the wilderness before us and has promised to surround us with his spirit when our times of testing come. To be sure, there will be beasts, but there will also be angels to minister to us, just as they did to Jesus.

Evil takes up residence in our world and in our souls in a way similar to the way computer viruses get inside our information systems and wreak havoc. (5) It takes constant vigilance and lots of shields, guards, and scrubbing, to hold back or undo the damage, but it can be done. It is the same with

fighting the forces that work against life as God intends it to be lived. This is not rocket science, but one time-tested way to fight them is to pray daily the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, saying “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, “When we pray those words, we acknowledge three things: the inevitability of temptation, the reality of evil, and the power of God to take us to higher ground.

There are many questions we have not addressed today: whether there is an actual Satan or whether the Biblical figure is the personification of all that is aggressively at work in the world against God and humanity. We have not talked about where evil comes from, or how it can continue to exist if God is all powerful. Some religious traditions say that evil is simply an illusion. Others explain it in terms of reincarnation and the law of cause and effect. Something terrible will happen to you in the next life as a consequence of the evil you did in your former life, and so on. Interestingly, the New Testament in the Christian tradition does not spend its word wondering about the why and wherefores of evil. As Frederick Buechner puts it, Christianity ultimately offers no theoretical solution at all. It merely points to the cross and say that, practically speaking, there is no evil so dark and so obscene- not even this-but that God can turn it to good. (6)

Lent is the season for repentance, which means literally “turning”. There is no better place for that turning to commence than beneath the cross of Jesus and at the communion table where he meets us with spiritual sustenance sufficient for all our needs, whether we are safely on the road to where we want to be or wrestling in the wilderness with one kind of beast or another. Anticipating tonight’s Academy Awards ceremonies put me in mind of the movie *American Beauty*, which won best picture winner in 1999. The characters in that movie are so absorbed in themselves that they are able to justify anything. The moment of redemption comes when Lester, the father who has been obsessed with a friend of his teenaged daughter, finally realizes that there really is something more important than the satisfaction of his own impulses.

May the angels of God attend you and deliver you from evil, in the strength of Christ. Amen.

Notes:

(1) “The First Stone,” *The Christian Century*, February 3-10, 1988.

(2) M. Scott Peck, *Glimpses of the Devil*, Free Press, 2005, p. xiii.

(3) As told in *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and other Servants*, The Upper Room, 1983.

(4) As quoted by William H. Willimon in *Pulpit Resource*.

(5) An idea from the writings of Walter Wink

(6) *Wishful Thinking*