

**RE-EXAMINING THE CONCEPT OF SATAN** - Mark 4:12-13; Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13

February 14, 2010

A Sermon By  
The Rev. Dr. Paul O. Boger, Sr.

The Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke say that at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness. The Gospel of John makes no reference to this event at all. Today and next Sunday I want to dwell on this event which has become the traditional passage for opening the Lenten Season.

What we have in the temptations of Jesus is conflict. Conflict between Jesus and evil, Satan, or the devil.

Some in today's world find it hard to conceive of a devil, a "Satan," an actual being who tempts us.

Others find it quite easy to believe in a personal Satan, in the existence of a devil. Over the years I have read several books and articles dealing with the question of evil and Satan.

One book, *The Origins of Satan*, by Princeton professor Elaine Pagels, explores our continuing fascination with the devil. She tells the story of how Christians borrowed the notion of Satan from the Jews and then, in a peculiar perversion, applied it to Jews, demonizing their Jewish adversaries as collaborators with Satan against Christians. Then Christians demonized their pagan enemies, Christian heretics, anybody with whom they had disagreement.

Pagels says that Satan is merely the ancient Jewish and Christian name for the "other," for anyone who is different from us and whose existence poses a challenge to our identity.

To Professor Pagels, evil is the origin of Satan, our evil causes us to project a fictitious being called Satan. Satan, she suggests, is not the

origin of evil. The problem with this is, if Satan is only a projection of our evil tendencies, then why isn't God only a projection of our good tendencies?

In another book on evil and Satan, *People of the Lie*, by Scott Peck we are told that the Bible says that Satan often "masquerades as an angel of light." Evil hides among the good. Mr. Peck suggests that one good place to look for evil is at church, not because church is inherently evil, it's just that church is where evil attempts to hide itself among the good.

Then there is Jon Levenson, a Jewish scholar who suggests in "The Devil in the Details," that if Satan tempts us to do things that, in our better moments, we might not have done, might Satan also energize us to do good things that, left up to our own devices, we might not have done?

Levenson illustrates this by referring to Christian theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945). Bonhoeffer was dismissed from his teaching posts by the Nazis. He lectured awhile in America, but decided to return home to Germany at the outbreak of World War II to work against the Nazis. Earlier, in castigating a Christian organization that was working with Hitler, Bonhoeffer did not shrink from using the inflammatory term, "Antichrist" to describe Hitler and those Christians who collaborated with the Nazis.

Eventually, Bonhoeffer paid for his resistance with his life. But Levenson wonders if it was not the evil of Hitler and his followers which provoked Bonhoeffer to do good, to do something he might not have done on his own. Bonhoeffer believed in the existence of the demonic, in the possibility of evil having a face, a name. In this case Hitler.

Levenson, perhaps because he is Jewish and thus a member of a people who have suffered unspeakable evil at the hands of others, is willing at least to consider the possibility that evil is real, that evil may have a personality, a face, a name -- Satan or Hitler.

In another book on sin, evil, and the Christian life, *Sighing for Eden*, William Willimon takes the view that, when discussing sin and evil, the idea of the existence of a personal devil, or Satan, is not very helpful. He suggests that evil is more in us, than outside of us. He says, those who say, when they have done wrong, "The devil made me do it," are just trying to excuse their own sinful behavior.

So what we have at this point is:

Satan doesn't exist but is the projection of our own evil.

Satan is evil mixed up among the good.

Satan is another word for evil to which we can give a name such as Hitler.

Satan or evil is more inside us than outside us.

And finally there's the view that Satan is a real being.

Which view is yours?

Regardless of where your thinking may be in this debate, one thing upon which all the books I've read agree and, I believe we can all agree, is that evil is real.

Let me tell you where I am in this debate. I am now willing to believe that our lives are not entirely our own, that we are in the grip of something or someone which or who leads us down dark paths. In short, I am willing to conceive of a power called evil as my mind continues to struggle with whether there is or is not an actual being named Satan.

When Jesus was confronted by Satan in the wilderness I believe that Jesus was face to face with some of his own internal conflicts, gripped by something or someone which or who wanted to lead him down dark paths.

I also believe that when the gospels tell us that Jesus was confronted by an evil that had a face, a personality, a name (Satan), they want us to know that the resistance to Jesus was real, genuine, organized, and subtle (note that Satan quotes Scripture just as well as Jesus!).

I believe, too, that in resisting Satan, Jesus wasn't just overcoming his own natural inclinations, Jesus was confronting and defeating the principalities and powers, the evil not just within the human heart, but the evil within the whole universe, evil even greater than that of our own creation.

I am someone who has rarely, if ever, encountered real injustice or cruelty as many people of color or religious minorities have.

I am someone who is well fed, in good health, a solid white Anglo-Saxon, protestant.

I am someone who can easily dismiss the idea of Satan as outmoded, naive, and unnecessary.

Yet for someone who has been the recipient of real evil, it is possible for evil to have a face, a name -- Satan. It is no kindness to tell someone who has been encountered by real racial or religious evil that evil is only some warped projection of our human psyche, a result of improper education or poor child rearing practices. The pain and anguish suffered by the victims of injustice, sin, and evil is real, so real we even have a name for it

The Apostle Paul wrote these anguished words after he had become a Christian:

"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me . . . Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from the body of death?" (Rom 7:15-20, 24).

I expect that you know, from your own experience, the sort of inner turmoil that Paul felt. Jesus knows, for he felt it himself there, at the beginning of his ministry, in the wilderness.

Thus when we pray the Lord's Prayer, we ask to be rescued in the time of trial, to be delivered from evil. Some versions of the Lord's Prayer say "Deliver us from the evil one." Thus the prayer makes explicit that there is a conspiracy against God's good kingdom in which a personification of evil (Satan) makes sense. First Peter says to young Christians:

"Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith" (I Pet 5:8-9a).

In praying to God to deliver us we acknowledge that God is greater than any foe of God. The power of evil must be admitted and taken seriously, yet not too seriously. Perhaps that is why, though the Lord's Prayer honestly focuses upon trial, temptation, and evil, it never mentions Satan by name. And that's probably the way we ought to think about Satan. Evil is not a mere projection of our conflict egos.

Evil is real.

Yet the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the cross and resurrection of Christ tell us that evil does not have the last word. Evil is a threatening power, though a defeated one.

Though the battle rages Monday through Saturday, every time we come to church we say that we know who has won the war. This Table is a sign of that victory.

When we pray for deliverance from evil, we acknowledge that we have not the resources, on our own, to resist evil. The Lord's Prayer is so honest. The power represented by the name Satan has real power over our lives. The good news is that just as Jesus was able to resist the wiles

of Satan, to reject his tempting offers, so we can also resist. In our weakness, we reach out and there is deliverance.

Isn't that how Alcoholics Anonymous puts it? "We had to reach out to a power greater than ourselves." Note that one of the ways Alcoholics Anonymous enables us to reach out "to a power greater than ourselves" and the chief means through which that power intervenes in our behalf, is by putting us as individuals in a group. The community enables us to be free from the Satan. Jesus stood alone in the wilderness against Satan. But we don't have to stand alone. Standing alone, as isolated individuals, we are no match for the devil.

Maybe that's why you are here this morning. You are not alone. You are here at this table with those who struggle with you against evil, against Satan, the tempter. The church stands with you amid Satan's temptations, in whatever wilderness you find yourself. Jesus, who knows what it's like to be face to face with evil, is at this table with you.

Hear, the good news as we approach our Lord's Table: Although temptation is real, Satan does not have the last word. Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ, we are more than victors. Amen