

“Devils, Demons, and Halloween”
October 31, 2010
Grove Presbyterian Church

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 14: 12-20

Isaiah 14 is often used to dramatize the fable about Lucifer and fallen angels. Lucifer is the Latin word here for Morning Star. Credit Milton and some late Jewish writings for the fable.

The text actually talks about something far more prosaic: the fall of Babylon, which touted itself as equal to God.

New Testament Lesson

Matthew 4: 1-11

Is Halloween fading? Is it vanishing the way of Christmas celebrations in our public schools?

What is going on in our local elementary schools? No longer is it Halloween but now Fall Festivals. No costumes allowed but there be pumpkin decorating, face painting, arts and crafts, scarecrows crafted by each class (no hay because of allergies).

Someone suggested that maybe the children could dress up as their favorite book characters, but that was dismissed. There would be no control over what they might choose. What if they should choose Dumbledore? Or Bella or Edward from Twilight?

Why the policy change?

Perhaps for safety reasons.

Perhaps for avoiding offense, respecting diversity as some parents object to a day devoted to violence and fear, blood and gore, demons and devils, and scary things that go bump in the night.

Is there a place anymore for Nosferatu, Count Dracula, for bats and black cats? Or have they all been banished to Mars? Exiles all. The macabre outlawed. Cleansed and purged by a clinical, antiseptic, never offensive modern age of only approved thought?

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Oh, how we enjoy the thrill of being scared and dabbling with dark things.

A thrill that does prompt some religious parents to object. Some from Christian groups, Jehovah Witnesses, some Muslims – each warning that evil lurks behind a day that many consider innocent silliness.

Pentecostal and Fundamentalist Christians advise how true Christians should avoid Halloween, arguing how it is a pagan holiday going back to Celtic Samhain (sau-in), us worshipping dark forces, giving tacit endorsement of the occult. There might be a grain of truth in what they say, given our gullibility, given the popularity of shows about ghosts and ghost hunting, given how some folks take some of these things way too seriously.

***Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good...***

***Romans 12: 9***

A friend of mine took a spiritual journey into the occult before he came back to Christianity and eventually became a Presbyterian pastor. He told me his story.

*“So what I did was I started looking into occultism. Now, remember back in the seventies that was very popular, in the early seventies. It was like being able to touch that spiritual realm where the mysteries lay. How could you open things up so that that relationship between spirit and the world came closer? I started investigating the classic form of what was known as magic. ... And I began to realize that the classic forms of occultism are really an attempt to take your will through a spiritual means and force the world of people around you to bend to what you want and what you believe is true. That it is not an offering of the self up to something higher and more significant, it is in fact an actual attempt to gain power over and control over the forces that are unseen, unknown. ... I began to realize that forcing others to do what you want ends up being something very demonic. And so, at that point I began to realize that maybe some of this occultic thing is true but it is illusional and isn't necessarily the right thing.”*

So what should we do about Halloween? All those witches, wizards, warlocks, and devils? Last night we were visited by two Ironmen, one Spider-man, several Fairies, one skunk, and lots of vampires, fortune tellers, ghouls, and witches.

Devils and demons are not to be trifled with.

For throughout the Bible the reality of Satan is far more interesting and ingenious. Satan is far cleverer because the real evil is giving us exactly what we want. There be monsters. My Room. Monsters Keep Out.

But they don't. Monsters pay no attention and come right in.

The problem is, these monsters, well, they often look exactly like us. Watch out for the devils in suits and ties carrying briefcases, or those wearing clerical collars.

Let me show you a real devil. Listen:

## Matthew 4: 1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him,

*“If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”*

But he answered,

*“It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”*

**Bob:** Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him,

*“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”*

Jesus said to him,

*“Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”*

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him,

*“All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”*

Jesus said to him,

*“Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”*

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

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Fill in the blanks in your Worksheet:

Why go into the wilderness? To be tempted. Fresh from being baptized, he has to face the temptations right at start of all things. He has to take care of them now and face them down now, because these same temptations are going to dog him, tempt him, for the rest of his life, all the way to the cross, temptations from his friends.

How long? Forty days and forty nights (which basically means a long time).

Each time Jesus responds by quoting scripture. Jesus relies on the word. Jesus consistently honors and glorifies God.

What title? Satan. The Satan. The adversary -- not of God, for God can have no power opposite God -- but the adversary of us. Satan doesn't oppose God but us.

How many times does the devil tempt Jesus? Things come in threes...

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Red Devils with horns and forked tails aside, the real evil is being given exactly what we want.

The real evil is how the Satan finds out that one twig of fear in your soul and there builds its nest.

What is your fear?

- ▲ Fear of not getting what you think you deserve?
- ▲ Fear of being found out?
- ▲ Fear of feeling alone?
- ▲ Fear of remaining unloved?
- ▲ Fear of being told what to do?
- ▲ Needing security? Whether personally or as a nation?
- ▲ Feeling unworthy? Is it really the bullying that drives to suicide or the shame, the embarrassment, the resentment, the perverse desire for getting even?

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THE FIRST TEMPTATION:

"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

What is this temptation? Henri Nouwen, a Jesuit Priest, wrote a mighty little book on these temptations. He wrote it after being so successful as a priest that he forgot what it meant to be Christian. Henri Nouwen was the acclaimed theologian of Harvard. He was brilliant, admired, respected. He began to enjoy his fame and popularity, his influence on the church.

Until he spotted the creeping sin that follows power as the tail follows the rat.

He resigned from Harvard, became the chaplain of a community of mentally retarded men, and recovered his soul.

What has been your wilderness?. The loneliness. The emptiness. The shadows at night. The chill of the morning. The barren crags and burning sun. The hunger pangs. The belly is the first test.

We require it. Have we the discipline required?

It is the trial of the wilderness that proves us to rely on something more than a full belly. The trial makes us, as it did Jesus, to seek beyond ourselves, beyond our own wills, beyond our own desires, and seek out the spiritual dynamism of God's Spirit.

Nouwen describes this first temptation of Jesus as the temptation to be relevant. Stones to bread. Why? To feed himself and then to feed all the hungry. Save the world. To solve the world's problems. To take care of them, us, to provide for everyone, to take responsibility for their welfare. The temptation to be competent, competently and professionally in charge of lesser others.

For how could he say no to a hungry child after first stuffing his face?

I know what is best for you. Let me fix it for you. My platform is your material salvation.

War is Peace
Freedom is Slavery
Ignorance is Strength

And Jesus replied:

"It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

How does Jesus reject the Satan?

Jesus knows the real tyrants are those who are welcomed as heroes.

I refuse to be your kind of savior, he says with a long sigh. I will give choices, not deny your humanity by controlling them. My brothers and sisters will not be my marionettes. I want authentic humans.

What I offer you is a holy relationship in the midst of their joys and sorrows.

This we need far more than correct opinions and worldly, material solutions.

Another theologian -- Pastor Bonhoeffer -- wrote how Jesus truly showed the righteous power of God by exercising power over evil, never by exercising power over persons. That's domination. That's rational self-interest. That's Ayn Rand. Jesus wants us free. When we exercise power over others, bending their wills to serve ours, that's when even a Jesus becomes the Satan.

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**THE SECOND TEMPTATION:**

***"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On***

***their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”***

What is this temptation? To be spectacular. To do such an incredible stunt that you will amaze everyone and become famous. Jesus will be the lead story on all the news broadcasts.

See him prove that he is the Son of God. Of course, we will want to follow him now. We all adore a star. And stars begin to believe they merit our adoration. They've earned their popularity. After all, they are important, they are special, they deserve our fawning.

When we stand in their aura, when we get the chance to get near them, we too feel superior. And then we begin to think we own them and they owe us.

***“Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”***

How does Jesus reject the Satan? He says, “I come not to lead but to serve. Red carpets are not for my feet. I don't need your notoriety. I don't need your approval. I'm the guy who cleans the mess afterwards. You won't find me at many Congressional Prayer Breakfasts.

I come not to win your applause or prove myself to you. But in my wounds, my labor, my weakness, I demonstrate the truth and wisdom of God. And by my cross, I expose you for who you really are: a humanity which wants the God they want, and crucifies the one they need.

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### **THE THIRD TEMPTATION:**

***“All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”***

What is this temptation? To be powerful. Self-confident and oozing authority, having all the answers that everyone needs and expects. Here's a most potent temptation: to build empires rather than grow the kingdom of God.

***“Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”***

How does Jesus reject the Satan? As Nouwen writes, “It is easier to be God than love God.” Jesus instead loves God, and so trusts the one he loves to be led where he must be led. Perfect love casts out fear (I John 4: 18). And fear is that twig in our soul upon which Satan builds his nest.

It is easier to be God than love God.

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When tested, when bereft of all comforts and security, you tend to reveal who you really are.

- ▲ The whiners, whine.
- ▲ The angry and vengeful find someone to blame.
- ▲ The coward shows himself the coward.
- ▲ The brave shows herself brave.
- ▲ The weak of faith show themselves weaklings.
- ▲ Those who believe, hold fast.
- ▲ Those who hold fast to faith, dismiss the fear.

The only authority the devil has over us is the authority we give him.

We tend to view the wilderness as misfortune when the wilderness is the place of our making. That is, just so long as we can resist the temptation to save people, to be popular, to be powerful, for their own good, of course.