

The Prayer Jesus Taught Temptation and Evil

TEXT:
Ezekiel 37:1-14
Matthew 4:1-11

March 9, 2008

The further we move into Lent, the more somber our moods become. We come ever closer to Jerusalem, to the Last Supper in that Upper Room, and to the cross. We wait with hope that once again the joy of Easter will burst through, but that's still two weeks away. We are in the thick of Lent, and as somber and as reflective as our moods ought to be, our Scripture readings this morning offer a far darker tinge to our spiritual journey.

We have all the makings of a good horror movie before us. The phrase "good horror movie" is an oxymoron in my book, since I cannot stand horror movies, but all the ingredients are here.

A man stands alone in a remote desert valley. The disembodied voice constantly reminds him that he is mortal – he can die. This same voice instructs him to prophesy, to preach to the bones of the dead – innumerable bodies, lying in pieces, which then reconstruct and come back to life around him at a word from the voice, at a word from God.ⁱ

And the second scene isn't much better. Again, a man stands alone in the desert. A voice speaks, and he is no longer alone. The devil – a personification of all that is evil in the world – appears before

him and offers a man's basest desires: food for a starving bellyⁱⁱ; invincibility that defies mortalityⁱⁱⁱ; and absolute power.^{iv}

"and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,"^v

As a rule, I do not like horror movies, but I can appreciate their complexity (the good ones anyway) and the talents that can pull us into another's story and have us participate vicariously and viscerally in the psychological torment, the irrational terror, the basest of human fears (the fear of the unknown) that (quite intentionally in the horror story genre) haunt us and can, given time and opportunity, drive us quite mad.

From one horror movie (or more aptly a gruesome mystery thriller), this quote sums up the human propensity to ignore these base reactions and reflections. Verbal Kent, in *The Usual Suspects*, quips:

"The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world that he doesn't exist."^{vi}

And it's true for most of us. We have a hard time believing in the modern notion of the devil, the guy from the Far Side cartoons or Halloween costume shops with the red cap, cloven hooves, pitch fork, and horns. The symbology alone is enough to confuse anyone: Pan's faun legs, Poseidon's Trident, and the

cuckold's horns, just to name a few – paganism, mythology, and adultery among others all rolled into one. Surely such a creature does not exist, and exhaustive theological treatises have been written on Satan and his appearance in the Ancient Near East.

Our concept of Satan – the tempter, the devil, or the evil one (take your pick on title) – is brought into mainstream Hebraic culture with the story of Job and the end Babylonian captivity around the 6th century BCE.^{vii} With the return of Jewish exiles from Babylon (recorded in Ezra and Nehemiah), we see a rise in dualism – a black and white world view easily dividing everything into either good or evil. And we hear, in the Book of Job about Satan, the accuser working for God in heaven to test the mortal. It is in this period, as the survivors return to Judah, that the **personification** of evil flourishes.

Perhaps it's a metaphorical coping mechanism:

- a way to express the horrors and the hardships of life;
- a way to explain how God can allow (or even cause) such irrational suffering;
- a way to explain prejudice and oppression;
- a way to explain war and the desolation of one's homeland;
- a way to demonize an enemy;
- a way to look at the bad in a

world created good and find a scapegoat, find a reason, find any explanation for the inexplicable.

Whether metaphor, allegory, or literal record, from this point in history forward Satan – the tempter, the devil, the evil one (again, take your pick on title) – continues to evolve as the ages march on, setting up the dichotomy between good and evil in a personified, tangible, conceivable way.

“and do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.”^{viii}

For many of us, this petition can seem inconceivable. Who is this evil one? What is the time of trial? What are these temptations? And why does Jesus insist that we – his disciples – include this in our own, regular prayer?

Let’s go back to the desert, either desert really. For Ezekiel, he knows this voice, this God for whom he is a prophet. And he knows this prophecy. God’s voice through the prophet proclaims,

“I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD have spoken and will act, says the LORD.”^{ix}

These are not zombies. These are not the living dead of movie infamy. These are the living – humans once dead, rising again

to life by the power of God’s breath, the spirit, that wind that moved across the waters of creation and continues to blow to this very day. These are the children of God who will be remembered after their mortal death, delivered from oblivion and desecration, and restored to life in and by the power and glory of God.

And yet all the ingredients, all the elements are here for Ezekiel to forget who he’s working for, for his trust to waver, and for him to freak-out as bones rise, the hopelessness of the dead is pushed aside, and the impossibility becomes the reality.

Maybe here is the metaphor for us, the point of the allegory for the forgotten and the fearful. Nothing – absolutely NOTHING – is hopeless. Even death is not hopeless. Even if our bodies are broken, our bones scattered, and we are left in remote desert, dumped (without ceremony) to rot – GOD REMEMBERS US and gives us life again. And if death is not hopeless, surely all the other dark and fearful things of this world are **nothing** to us if we listen to God’s redeeming voice and trust Him as Ezekiel did.

“and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”^x

In the other desert, however, Jesus hears a different voice, and he knows this other voice – this subtle and not so subtle, cajoling and controlling voice full of larger-than-life promises partnered with seemingly simply reciprocities.

“It’s no big deal,” the voice says.

“You need this to live, for your

quality of life to be maintained.

There’s no danger.

There’s no harm to you or to anyone else. No one’s here but us.

You can be in total control, free from constraint, fear, worry, or consequence.

Go on. Do what you need to do. Do what you want to do.”

For us, we who are mortal and human, we hear the answer that comes from him who was also mortal and yet immortal, human and yet also divine:

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

Our fears, our desire for control, our well intentioned efforts to fulfill our basic needs and care for others (much less all this in excess) – these are our temptations.

Our resistance to God and our propensity to listen for and even actively seek out other, easier voices to hear and heed – this is our evil.

It exists. Evil exists, and we see it all around us. We can argue for hours and years over the problem of evil’s existence – theodicy, it’s called in theological circles, the question of how evil came to exist in a world which God created as good – but that’s a different sermon and a much longer conversation than time allows for today. But despite the arguments over evil’s origins, we look around us and see every day that evil exists.

“The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world that he doesn’t exist.”^{xii}

And yet we see it all around us. In the simplest moments and torments of our every day lives and in the grander scheme of ballooning temptation and evils unchecked that lead to oppression, abuse, war, torture, and all those things that plague our society, we see evil in this world.

The guy in the cape with the pitch fork or any personification that movies and imagination may conjure as the devil may not truly exist. Such images and personifications may be best left to literary flourish and Halloween extravaganzas. But evil moods and dark moments in humanity surely do, witnessed to over and over again in the daily news, across the pages of history, and in our own personal lives.

Evil exists, and the crippling effect of the dark moments in our lives make it hard to see or seek the light, to know where to begin to overcome such subtle (and not so subtle) temptations, to banish fear and trust in God's steadfast presence. Yet, in the horror story of Jesus and the devil in the desert, we are given a way to start.

"Worship the Lord your God and serve only him."^{xiii}

The very act of worship is deliverance from evil. The things we do in our lives that glorify God and follow Christ's example by their very nature keep us from accusation and the need to stand trial. Evil finds itself, in whatever form (abstract or personified), in those places and situations that do not worship God. So, we pray for the strength of spirit to follow Christ's example in the desert; to trust, as Ezekiel did (no matter

how scary the situation may seem), that God stands by us no matter what.

And whenever we are unsure, when we waver or freak-out or just need a little nudge, we can place ourselves in that desert and ask ourselves – not "What would Jesus do?" but instead, "Does this worship God?" And when the answer is, "No," we can turn to this petition in the prayer that Jesus taught.

"and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,"^{xiv}
"and do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one."^{xv}

As we continue the journey of Lent and anticipate the darkness of Good Friday, may we live as an Easter people with hope. And let us remember to pray to God, whose kingdom, power, and glory are forever. Amen.

i. The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version (New York: HarperCollins Publishers) 1993, Ezekiel 37:1-14.

ii. Ibid., Matthew 4:3.

iii. Ibid., Matthew 4:6.

iv. Ibid., Matthew 4:9.

v. BibleWorks 5.0.020w, King James Version (BibleWorks, LLC) 2001, Matthew 6:13.

vi. The Usual Suspects, dir. Bryan Singer (PolyGram Filmed Entertainment)1995.

vii. NRSV, *introduction* pp.700 and 750.

viii. Ibid., Matthew 6:13.

ix. Ibid., Ezekiel 37:12-14.

x. KJV, Matthew 6:13.

xi. NRSV, Matthew 4:10.

xii. Ibid., The Usual Suspects.

xiii. NRSV, Matthew 4:10.

xiv. KJV, Matthew 6:13.

xv. NRSV, Matthew 6:13.

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