

# The Alien War

Isa 6; 1 Cor 15; Luke 5

Sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's, Austin on February 6, 2022

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I'll never forget the day I first saw one living being come out of another. I was doing my chaplaincy residency at Duke Hospital and it was my day to be the overnight, on-call chaplain. The overnight chaplain is given a hotel-like room in the hospital which was effectively a windowless janitor's closet with a twin-sized mattress stuffed inside it. At Duke, on average, you would be called to 3 or 4 deaths per overnight shift, so trying to sleep was usually pointless, and it was in the sleepless in-betweens of the night that it happened. I opened my laptop and pressed play on Ridley Scott's 1979 film *Alien*. John Hurt's character was lying unconscious on a starship hospital bed somewhere in deep space and then an alien burst forth from the astronaut's chest. I about jumped through the hospital ceiling tiles.

This haunting and gruesome incident, surely one of the most memorable scenes in cinema history, represents another chapter in humanity's long search for metaphors to adequately capture the complexity of our own anthropology—here the metaphor saying something along the lines of, to be a human being is sometimes to feel like you have another creature, an alien presence, something that has an independent, even malicious, will of its own living inside of you. To be a human is to occasionally feel like there is something inside you that is working against you, constantly fighting to make it to the surface of your lived, embodied reality.

Other examples abound. You don't even have to leave the world of film. There's the big guy in *Men in Black* whose face unlatches like a door to reveal a tiny little alien inside piloting the skin suit from a miniature control center. Think about zombie movies—people who have been “bitten” who are thereby subject to, influenced by, infected by some other, inhuman presence that compels humans to do things they would never do in their normal, rational state. Think about the ring from *Lord of the Rings*, this artifact that Frodo wears around his neck, that weighs so heavily on his mind, that constantly tempts him, lures him, to use the ring's power for his own, selfish ends, to amplify his own power. The *Lord of the Rings* is full of fighting between armies of good and evil but central psychological drama of the whole series is whether or not Frodo will win the battle between good and evil taking place within his own soul.

These are to varying degrees silly and oversimplified examples, but they're all reaching toward something I suspect we're all familiar with. Do you feel a war of wills within the walls of your own soul? Are you confused by, perhaps sometimes even embarrassed or ashamed of your own desires? Or alternatively, have you ever been surprised by your own capacity for good, for compassion and forgiveness? How should we understand this complex dynamic?

Characters in all three of our readings for today seem to be wrestling with these questions. Let's start with Paul. Paul is talking about Jesus' appearances after his resurrection, making a long list, a list that ends by saying that Jesus appeared also to him, to one untimely born, and not because he is special, but, as Paul says, I am the least of the apostles, unfit to bear even that title, because I persecuted the church of God.

But then he says—and here’s where it starts to get interesting—*but by the grace of God I am what I am*. Then, reflecting back on the long list he has made, he feels the need to actually stick up for himself again, saying *Actually, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me*. Paul is trying to disentangle the forces at work in his own heart.

The prophet Isaiah and Simon Peter have almost mirror experiences to one another. Both are confronted by the glory of God—Isaiah through a vision of angels, Peter through a miraculous catch of fish. And both, like Paul, experience onrushing emotions of unworthiness. *Woe is me*, says Isaiah. *I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips*. And *Go away from me, Lord*, says Peter, *for I am a sinful man*.

All three feel unworthy. All three are intimately acquainted with that within themselves that wants to choose everything that is not God. All have regrets. All have made mistakes. And when presented with God’s pure and unadulterated glory, they feel they should be disqualified.

This is the first thing that feels worth pointing out about these three episodes that might be helpful to us. And Peter is the one who names it. Sin is the name of the evil alien living in your chest. One of the classic Christian definitions of sin was first articulated by St. Augustine. Augustine said that sin makes itself known primarily in the will, such that we human beings, originally created as good, as very good, originally created to live in perfect companionship with God, are now born with our wills, in a way, bent in on themselves. Our desires have been infected, as it were. So we are born with an almost natural condition to choose ourselves over others, to anoint ourselves gods of our own universes. Sin is the name of the zombie who bit the human heart. And the important takeaway here is that it’s something we all share in common. Nobody is immune. We are sinful. We are people of unclean lips. We are the least of all. We have made mistakes. That’s the first point.

The second thing to point out is that God calls them anyway. God calls Isaiah, and Paul, Peter. And God calls you. God does not see sin—the presence of this hostile, alien force in our hearts, this infection that makes us perpetually fail—as an obstacle to our usefulness for him. And when Isaiah, Paul, Peter, or you and me react to this call by calling attention to our unworthiness, God comes back and says, *Don’t worry, I will give you everything that you need*.

The first thing God gives—this is point 2A for those keeping track—is the forgiveness of sins. The angel descending to singe Isaiah’s lips with a burning coal is a picture of Christ, the Son of God, descending to humanity to singe the heart of humanity’s sinful condition.

God forgives our sin and so takes care of our past. It’s not that we cannot still sin. And it’s not that we don’t still feel the evil alien living inside the walls of our hearts. It’s not even that sin can’t still take a terrifying grasp on the lives of individual Christians. But it’s that in the grand sweep of God’s story, sin has an expiration date. It’s an infection that has been cured and we’re living with its lingering but losing effects. The consequences of our sin have been blotted out. Guilt has been removed.

If the forgiveness of sins takes care of the past, the second thing God gives takes care of our future. It’s called the Holy Spirit. That is, God not only kills the ultimate efficacy of the evil alien, God implants in your heart a good alien to help you in the journey ahead. This good alien is called the Holy Spirit. God implants God’s own

self in you to help you in the ongoing struggle. If you feel unable to change your destructive habits, if you feel like you don't have the power within yourself to win the battle within you, don't worry. You don't have to come up with the strength to win on your own. Let God's Spirit work within you instead. This is exactly what Paul is sensing within his own bones. He senses that the good he has done outstrips the capacity he has within himself. He has to credit something else. He has to credit God.

What's different about this alien, besides the fact that it is good, is that it is from the God who created you in the first place. From the God who really knows what is best for you and what isn't. And what the Spirit is doing is working to restore God's original intention in your life. To bring you back to perfect, harmonious companionship with God, your neighbor, and the earth. It is not actually alien at all. It is God. The God who created your innermost parts. God who knew you before you formed in your mother's womb. It's God who knows you better than you know yourself. That is who is in you working to make you the version of you God destined you to be.

These two gifts, the forgiveness of sins and the giving of the Holy Spirit, the past and the future, come together in the moment of baptism.

The third thing God gives to Isaiah, Paul, Peter, Frodo, and me and you is the call itself. I remember a mentor said to me once that the state of mind that most often exists immediately prior to sin is boredom. One of the ways God helps us win the battle is by giving us good work to do. The wonderful thing about the work God calls us to do is that God never wastes anything we have been through, including our sins and shortcomings.

To Paul, God says, you persecuted the church? How about I use you to build the church instead? To Peter and James and John, Oh, you fish? How about you fish for people instead?

In this way, the Spirit is doing more in your life than working to restore you to God's original created intention. God wants to fold in everything you have been through in the meantime. Redemption is always more interesting than creation. God issues an invitation to each of us. I wonder what God is calling you to.

But here's the difficult thing for us to admit. It is easier to pretend we don't hear God's call on our lives. Or, if we do, it's easier to stick with our objection that we are not worthy to answer it. Because then we don't have to change anything about our lives. We can just keep fishing for fish. Then we don't have to confront our own sin and shortcomings. We can continue to indulge them instead. And we can choose to ignore the alien battle going on in our hearts. We can just continue to live distracted lives, continue to exist in some undefined middle ground. But the truth is there is no middle ground.

God is calling you, whether you can hear it or not. God is calling you into a great adventure through the forgiveness of your sins, through the transformation of your past mistakes into future wisdom, into the transformation of your heart from something wounded to something healing. God is calling you into a future that is bigger than your past. The question is, do we have the courage to say to God, "Here I am. Send me."

Amen.