

Believing In The Devil

Genesis 3; 2 Cor 4; Mark 3

A sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's, Austin on June 6, 2021

I don't imagine you spend much time thinking about the devil. The red beast with a pitchfork and horns is no longer a credible character within our contemporary cosmology. After all, we enlightened citizens of the 21st century "believe in science." We have spent the last year touting that like a creed. Believing in God is embarrassing enough a burden to bear in today's philosophical climate, surely we can at least leave the devil and his minions behind. Surely, Satan is no longer a necessary component for the way we make sense of the world as Christians. It's not that there's not plenty of bad stuff going on. It's just that for the most part we have arrived at more explanations more palatable to our modern sensibilities, right?

What I mean is, can't most of the bad stuff in the world—from the big-picture bad stuff like war, racism, poverty, and hunger, all the way down to the small-picture annoying stuff like back pain and feeling underappreciated at work—can't pretty much all of that at the end of the day be blamed on just human error? On human frailty and sin? Aren't we the source of all that is bad? There are, perhaps, some things that are not so obviously the consequence of poor individual human choices, like hurricanes and other natural disasters. But aren't those a result of climate change? And isn't climate change still a human-caused problem, even if its collective human decisions added together over generations? I suppose some mystery remains in other areas, like what is to blame for some cancer diagnoses or cases of clinical depression. But even in those things, though we admit to not fully understanding why those things happen, we are confident that if there are satisfying explanations they lie not with demons but somewhere under a microscope at the Mayo Clinic. The point is this, we do plenty of bad stuff on our own, thank you very much, devil. We don't need you.

With all this in mind, we know then how to read the Bible stories we come across in today's readings. The serpent that tricks Eve into eating the apple? Just a metaphor for our sinful nature, for the innate disposition all humans share towards selfishness. A parable about our predilection to desire whatever it is we're told we can't have. Jesus casting out demons? How about Jesus' curing mental illness instead. Aren't demons, in other words, just ancient vocabulary words for what science has revealed to be just schizophrenia—or whatever.

There's only two problems with everything I have said so far. The first is Jesus. Which is to say, it really doesn't seem like Jesus thinks Satan is a metaphor. Jesus appears to believe that the devil or whatever you want to call him—God's Enemy—is very real. And is very active in wreaking havoc in the world and in our individual lives.

What's happening in our Gospel reading for today is that the crowds are trying to make sense of how in the world Jesus is able to do what he's doing in casting out these demons. Their argument is that only a more powerful demon can tell lesser demons what to do; therefore, Jesus must be in cahoots with the prince demon Beelzebub. Jesus argues in return that they simply have a poor demonology. Demons by their nature work together. A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand. And this one is obviously standing. Look at the evidence. Then he shares this dense, mini-parable: "No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed can the house be plundered." Jesus' point is, I fight

for the other team. It's not because I'm in cahoots with Beelzebub that I can do this, it's because I'm in cahoots with God. At no point is the existence or realness of the devil in question. Remember that whole episode between Jesus and the devil in the desert. Do we really think that was just Jesus "wrestling with his conscience?"

The second problem with the idea that the devil and demons aren't real is you—your own life experience. Let me ask you this: Do you ever feel like something out there in the world is trying to trick you? Do you ever feel like your path is riddled with traps tailor-made to tempt you? Do you on occasion feel some voice in your head goading you to do something you know you shouldn't do? Something you know, in fact, is bad for you? Does the deck of life sometimes feel stacked against you? Here's my favorite way to put the question: Doesn't it just feel sometimes like there's something or someone out there that's laughing at you? Something that is delighting in your suffering? Perhaps even orchestrating it? I don't know what to call that other than the devil.

Look, I'm not a whole lot more comfortable talking about the prince of Darkness than you are listening to me talk about him. There is a moment in our baptism liturgy that is very helpful. It is called the renunciations. When you are baptized you are asked to make three renunciations. You are asked to renounce all sinful desires, the evil powers of this world, and then Satan and all spiritual forces of wickedness. This is a three-tiered understanding of what's wrong with the world. We covered the human sin part already.

The second renunciation is of "evil powers." Evil—a word I intentionally avoided using in the first half of the sermon—is a word that refers to the fact that if you took every human sin and put them into a bucket, you still wouldn't account for all that is bad in the world, because sins, when combined, are greater than the sum of their parts. They take on a life of their own. That life of their own is what we call evil. What's wrong in the world is more complex than just the summation of every human mistake.

Racism is a great example of evil. Racism is such a massively complex matrix of sins, that if I could snap my fingers and every person in the world could be instantly cured of their racism, that wouldn't get rid of all the racism in the world. It wouldn't change the disproportionate number of black men in prison. It wouldn't cure the generational wealth gap or the variance in life-expectancy between white communities and communities of color; it wouldn't solve under-resourced school districts more often than not allocated to communities of color; it wouldn't change the overwhelming whiteness of resource-privileged neighborhoods like Barton Hills. That's just one example.

Believing in the devil is just one more rung up the ladder from evil. It's to believe that God really does have an Enemy; that there is someone trying to play the role of conductor to this horrible orchestra of sin and evil all around us; someone who is trying to whip it into nightmare symphony—one that we know the tune of only too well. It is to believe in an Enemy who tricks Eve into eating an apple because his number one desire is to cause a rift in the relationship between God and those God loves. It is to believe that there is something or someone out there laughing at you.

Here's why I think everything I have said so far matters: If you think that everything bad in the world is just a matter of poor human decision making, you might be tempted to think that good human decision making will be enough to fix everything that is wrong. Let me put it more personally: If you think everything that has gone

wrong in your life, or every mistake you have made is your fault, and your fault alone, you might be tempted to think that you're on your own to make it better. Listen carefully: You can't do it on your own. And you don't have to.

The devil and his demons are not the only ones fighting for your life. Jesus is too. And he is in cahoots with the God of the Universe. You may feel at times that the deck of life is stacked against you. That traps lay in your path everyday. But let me ask you this: Have you ever felt your heart swell with joy? Have you ever been bowled over by something beautiful? Have you ever cried out of happiness? Has a song or a poem or painting or a conversation ever left you feeling a surge of energy and hope for the future? Have you ever felt the power of forgiveness? You might not be naturally inclined to believe in God, I don't know what to call that other than Jesus; other than the Spirit of Jesus Christ fighting on your behalf. There is a very real battle going on. Despite the discomfort we citizens of modernity feel about the phrase "spiritual warfare," there is a real battle going on. And you're right in the middle of it.

The devil tricked Eve into eating an apple and sin and evil have been running amok ever since. But don't forget that the devil isn't the only trickster in this game. God tricked the devil into killing his Son; he let the Devil believe that by doing so he would win the eternal battle. The Devil didn't understand that in killing Jesus he was doing nothing other than letting God into his own house through the back door. Jesus descended into hell. And bound up the strong man. He defeated Death. And won for us the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting. And is now preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond measure.

Let's end in the garden. In our reading, Adam and Eve have just eaten the apple. And they are hiding. We all make their first mistake, pretty much every day. But what I'm saying is that we don't have to make their second mistake. This is Satan's oldest trick. To convince you that you are alone. That you are alone with everything that is wrong in your life. That you're alone with whatever complex evil is overwhelming your world. God asks them "Where are you?" God knows perfectly well where they are. God wants them to know that they are not alone. And neither are you.

Amen.