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6/10/2012, The Second Sunday after Pentecost¹
Genesis 3:8-15, 2 Corinthians 4:13 -- 5:1, Mark 3:20-35
It's Not Looking So Good for Satan

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I begin with a passage from our First Lesson, from Genesis 3:

¹⁴The LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you above all cattle, and above all wild animals; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. ¹⁵I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” (Genesis 3:14-15, RSV)

The Lectionary Commentary on the Gospels, which many of us preachers regularly consult, warns the preacher that today's Gospel Lesson is about the devil, but that modern folk tend to dismiss talk of the devil. They think it embarrassing and quaint.²

But I suspect that even some of us modern city folk believe in the devil. Evil is just too spooky in this world. It is as if we can add together the whole pile of human sin, the whole kit and caboodle of it, and yet there would still be some evil beyond that – some evil that contributes to that pile of human sin.

In fact, it is rather depressingly easy to open the newspaper and find evidence of Satan's cruel work: strangers opening fire in public places, a young person murdering, hacking up, and mailing parts of a human body, suicides, grinding poverty across the world, unemployment and economic shifts that seem to defy human mastery.

Well, I am glad to report that the drift of today's Bible Lesson is that things are not looking too good for Satan. He can try to get his final licks in while he can, but even that is useless in the end, for he simply cannot stop the good plans of Jesus from prevailing.

¹ This sermon overlaps with my first midweek Lent sermon from earlier this year in the sermon series “Stunning Sins and Vast Forgivenesses.” That first sermon was on the Fall of Adam and Eve. http://www.immanuelnyc.org/sermons/20120229_Midweek_Lent_1.pdf

² *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts. The Gospels* Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 2001) pages 199-202.

LUTHER ON GENESIS 3

Let's begin this theme by taking a look at our First Lesson, from Genesis Chapter 3, from the story of the Fall of Adam and Eve.

In Martin Luther's commentary on this story, we find some gentle words of encouragement for our human race. He writes these words of encouragement quietly, almost as if in passing, but I think they are wonderful.

First, Luther points out that the Lord curses the *serpent*, but not Adam and Eve:

Because you have done this, cursed are you above all cattle, and above all wild animals; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. (Genesis 3:14, KJV)

I am glad of this. I hate to think of human beings slithering around on the ground like snakes. I like us walking upright, with our faces seeing the sunshine. I'm glad we don't have to slither.

Here is an early intimation of that beloved Gospel story about the woman caught in adultery. Jesus lifts himself up from his kneeling, where he has been writing in the dust of the ground – that territory where the serpent must crawl upon his belly and do his mischief. Jesus lifts himself up, notices that the woman now stands alone, with her accusers gone, and he says these dear words to her:

And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more. (John 8:11, KJV)

Caught right in the midst of the act, Jesus does not condemn, but calls the adulterous woman to holiness of life and lets her go in peace.

Likewise in the story of our fall, caught right in the midst of the act, with the forbidden fruit still rumbling in our tummies, the Lord does not condemn us. If he had, we would not be, for his condemnation is too much for a human to bear. He chastises, he punishes, he calls to repentance, yes, but he does not condemn. At least he does not condemn *us*. Rather, he condemns the serpent. He condemns *Satan* who stands behind the serpent.

Luther's second encouraging note is that the Lord lets Adam and Eve *overhear* the condemnation of Satan. This is crucial because it means that Adam and Eve and all their descendants to this present day need not yield to despair, as if for us and our kind there is no hope. For the wonderful thing about the condemnation of Satan is that it speaks of a Descendant of Adam and Eve who will conquer Satan: bruise his head. One of their seed will triumph over the old Enemy. And if *Satan* is conquered, then all is well. I am speaking of the Gospel. Adam and Eve had the Gospel preached to them for the first time, caught right there in the midst of their original sin. They were thrust out of the Garden, and we all live east of Eden now, in a world in which the devil still prowls around like a hungry lion seeking whom

he can devour. But with the Lord's ancient condemnation of the devil, Gospel hope was created on earth. Adam and Eve were the first to hear something true and important: things are going to get better.

TODAY'S GOSPEL LESSON

Now, let's skip ahead to today's Gospel story. The scribes who have come down from Jerusalem have leveled quite an insult toward Jesus. They do not rejoice in his miracles but rather accuse him of being in league with the prince of demons – one named Beelzebul. That is pretty awful. These scribes have looked upon the man with the withered hand now restored, upon the possessed people now sitting clear-minded and peaceably, and dismissed their healing as the work of a demon. They give the most miserable interpretation of the work of Jesus, thereby insulting our Lord and robbing those he healed of joy in their healing.

Jesus, however, answers these scribes in a calm and thoughtful way. Truly it is said of our Lord, that he did not return evil for evil:

²²He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips.

²³When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly. (1 Peter 2:22-23, RSV)

Jesus begins his answer by pointing out that of all conflicts, the most damaging is the one that renders the community. Civil war weakens the nation. Likewise, if Satan is casting out Satan, then his devilish nation is crumbling. The force of this is to say that it is not Satan who healed the withered arm or cast out the demons, but rather Jesus himself.

But then Jesus goes on to point out that he is the stronger one. He is stronger than Satan. Jesus explains this using the figure of the plundering of a house:

But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man; then indeed he may plunder his house. (Mark 27, RSV)

That is exactly what Jesus was doing. He was entering boldly into the devil's house and deprived him of his goods – poor souls suffering under Satan's sway. We speak commonsense here. You can't enter a strong man's house and take off with his things unless you are somehow stronger or smarter than that one. It takes strength to pull something like that off. In healing the sick folk and casting out the demons, Jesus was plundering Satan's house. Jesus continues to do so to this very day. Every baptism is but another instance of this divine plundering. Every poor sinner who at last says, "Enough! I am done with this sin. I mean to walk with Jesus from now on" adds to the plundering of Satan's house.

In light of today's Bible Lessons, I think we can say that things are not looking too good for Satan. Things are not looking up for that cruel spirit. His house is being plundered, his chief weapon – death – is powerless against Jesus, and his future leads on toward hell. Origin of old speculated that maybe in the end even Satan would be saved, but most of the Church has disagreed with that. The future of Satan is very gloomy.

THAT CRUEL GUY

Now, let's focus a bit on that cruel guy, Satan. We all have some theory about him. The Bible itself isn't decisive because when it mentions the devil, it always seems to do so quickly, as if hating to linger with the subject. Also, the Biblical picture of the devil varies. In the book of Job, Satan seems to be a respected member of the heavenly court. His job is to accuse human beings, like a prosecuting attorney. But most times, the Bible speaks of the devil in dark, dangerous tones. St. Peter, for example, gives this warning:

⁸Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: (1 Peter 5:8, KJV)

This teaching from St. Peter about the devil as a prowling lion pictures the devil as ripping and roaring and slashing and clobbering us to death. But often the ways of the devil are gentler, but just as dangerous.

Strengths and weakness are often related to one another. An inclination to being judgmental toward others, for example, is sometimes the shadow-side of something good: a yearning for a more perfect world -- a yearning, alas, that is often disappointed and tends to frustrate us. And so it is with the devil in his attacks upon us: he has a feel for human weakness, but it is a weakness that is the shadow-side of something good: I mean our human ability to be moved by words. We are vulnerable to words. A word from my beloved can mean more to me than money or bullets. The good Lord brings all of his creatures into being by talking about them: Let there be light, let there be fish in the sea and birds in the air, and so on. But to *one* of his creatures does the Lord actually speak: he speaks to us. That's what it means to be a human: the Lord talks to us, not just about us, but to us. We hear him in our conscience continually. We are the kinds of people who can be spoken to.

So the devil joins right in. He speaks to us! Indeed he does. He roars sometimes, but he whispers more often. He whispers in the ear, "Surely you will not die if you eat from the forbidden tree. Surely you will not die if you depart from the Word of God." But, then, the devil is a born liar, and we do ourselves harm in listening to him. He uses words to attack the Word, as Luther put it.

St. Peter, then, describes Satan as a prowling lion seeking souls to devour. And Luther reminds us that Satan can appear as an angel of light, gentle and beguiling

in his temptations. Above all now let me one Biblical theme about the devil that is clear and frightening. Jesus, who knows his enemy well, says this about him:

He was a *murderer* from the beginning... (John 8:44, RSV)

BUT JESUS COMES TO GIVE US LIFE

Now here is my point: Whether the attacks of the devil upon us are violent or quiet and subtle, their goal is always to take away life from us, whether in one big fit of destruction or by dribs and drabs slowly diminishing life for us. The devil is a murderer. He begrudges every breath we take. We have lived far too long, in his opinion, and our life is an offense to him. He wants us done for!

That is why the devil always tries to lead us away from Jesus, for Satan looks at Jesus and sees Life itself. How did Jesus describe his own mission?

¹⁰The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.

The devil hears this and groans. These are bitter words for him. He grinds his teeth with frustration with this divine goal of our Lord: that we should have life, aye, and more abundantly.

In Coffee Hour today, my wife, Pastor Carol Fryer, is going to talk about her upcoming adventure to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro. She is doing this for the sake of life! Will it be fun to climb the great mountain? I don't know. But at least I can say this: It will be a fundraiser for the Malaria campaign in Africa, and that campaign is a vast effort to save life on earth.

http://www.mnys.org/ministries2/kili_climb/

I don't imagine the devil is happy about it. Glad to say, I think Jesus is, and he is the strong One – the One who binds Satan and plunders his house.

Let good deeds like Carol's continue. Proudly, relentlessly seek life. Walk with Jesus, seeking purity in both deed and heart. Flee from the devil, whether his temptations are large and outrageous, or quiet and hardly condemned by the world. Flee the devil for he means you no good, but only harm. He lusts for the deprivation of life, so let us cling to Jesus, who came that we might have life and that abundantly, and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.