

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
October 6, 2024 – 20 Pentecost
Job 1:1; 2:1-10; Mark 3:7-15; 20-30
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This morning I want to begin by talking about Satan. Let me say first that I am not going to speak about Satan as portrayed in modern fiction or movies or artwork or popular beliefs. I avoid all those things and know virtually nothing about them. What I want to speak about is how Satan is portrayed in the Bible because Satan is an important figure in our lessons from the Book of Job and the Gospel of Mark.

“Satan” as a character appears here and there throughout the Bible, both in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. The word “Satan” comes from a Hebrew verb meaning roughly “oppose,” and Satan is an opponent or adversary. In many cases in the Hebrew text, “Satan” is not a name, but rather a title – “the Satan,” “the adversary.” In most of Satan’s appearances in the Bible Satan tempts people to do what God has forbidden, and when people follow Satan’s lead, disastrous consequences follow.

During this month we will be reading selections from the Book of Job. Each selection imparts wisdom and gives us cause to think. But I would suggest that you read the entire book to have a better understanding. And I would recommend Don Kraus’ “The Book of Job: Annotated and Explained.” This is a new translation from the Hebrew with an introduction and commentary. There are copies on the table in the narthex for you to take.

Remember that the Book of Job is not a realistic narrative, and we are not meant to believe that the events it describes actually took place. It is a poetical expression of the human effort to understand why we suffer. Today’s lesson begins after it has been established that Job is very wealthy, very blessed, and very righteous. God is portrayed as a monarch in a heavenly court. The Satan seems to be the heavenly being who, on behalf of God, tests human beings to assess their worth. God gives Satan permission to destroy Job’s vast possessions and kill his children. When that happens, still Job “did not sin nor did he cast reproach on God.” Then Satan gets God’s permission to harm Job’s flesh with “loathsome sores.” And still Job remains faithful to God. As the book goes on, Job and God engage in dialogue that is both surprising and profound. We will hear some of this in the weeks to come.

By the time of the New Testament, “Satan” along with “Beelzebul” had become a proper name for the head of the evil spiritual forces opposed to God, culminating in the Book of Revelation (12:9) where the evil dragon, fighting Archangel Michael and the angels, is called “that ancient serpent ... the devil and Satan.”

We come to our reading from Mark’s Gospel. Jesus and his disciples had been traveling, and Jesus had been curing crowds of sick people. “Then he went home.” So, his family was nearby. Jesus has been casting out demons or unclean spirits. In his day this meant healing of physical and mental disorders as well as exorcism of demonic possession. His family members seem to believe the popular opinion that Jesus is out of his mind himself. The scribes who have come from the religious center of Jerusalem accuse Jesus of casting out demons by the ruler of demons. Beelzebul is a name for Satan which is derived from the name of the Canaanite god Baal. Jesus was accused of having “an unclean spirit” himself.

Jesus challenges the scribes – “How can Satan cast out Satan?” No, that isn’t what has been happening. Jesus has tied up the “strong man,” Satan, and he has been able to plunder the strong man’s house, the demonic world, because he has defeated Satan. Jesus has been casting out demons by the power of God, not by the power of Satan.

Then Jesus makes a very strong statement, a really frightening statement: “whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.” What does it mean to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit? In my best understanding this has to do with calling what is good evil and what is evil good. The Holy Spirit is the spirit of truth. This is about truth and lies. Remember the phrase from John’s Gospel (8:44): Jesus says, “When [the devil] lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” But speaking of himself in John’s Gospel (14:6), Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” It is interesting to read that even the unclean spirits whom Jesus was casting out knew and declared the truth about him. Mark writes: “Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, ‘You are the Son of God!’ (3:11).

People who call what is holy and good demonic and evil endanger their souls, such as the people who plotted against Jesus to destroy him. People who harm and exploit others for their own gain but justify their actions with lies. People who deliberately refuse to see and witness to the truth. People who call God the opposer of God and the opposer of God, God. We all know what some of the terrible consequences of such behavior are in the world. This passage suggests that the consequences go beyond this world.

Our Christian faith has many facets. It is certainly “spiritual.” We believe in God, “the One who is Mystery,” as God has been called. We believe that human beings are spiritual. We are more than our bodies. We experience God in and through our spirits or souls. We trust that when our bodies die, our souls will go on to continued life with God. We ask the big spiritual and metaphysical questions: who is God? how are we connected to God? what is the meaning of life? why do we suffer? And so on.

And our Christian faith is incarnational. We believe that God created all there is, and that God’s creation is good. We believe that God became incarnate in Jesus and experienced life in a human body, thereby understanding us “from the inside.” We believe that Jesus was recognized by his followers in his resurrected body. Our faith is incarnational and practical. What we do with our bodies matters to God. How we treat other bodies matters to God. Even though we may never be able to arrive at an answer to the question “why do we suffer?” that satisfies us, we can choose to act to relieve suffering when we see it. The teaching of Jesus clearly guides us to do so.

I believe we are meant to keep wrestling with the “big questions” and to keep speaking honestly with God about them – as Job did. Though we may fail to find satisfactory answers, in the wrestling with the questions and in the honest engagement with God, we will – like Jacob with the angel – be blessed. At the same time, I believe we are meant to look honestly at the choices in front of us, identify what is right and what is wrong, and choose what is right.

As I wrote these words, the words of a song came strongly to my mind. “If I Can Help Somebody,” a song I know from the recordings of the great Gospel singer, Mahalia Jackson. “If I can help somebody, as I pass along. If I can cheer somebody, with a word or song. If I can spread love’s message, as the Master taught, then my living shall not be in vain.” By God’s grace, we can all help somebody, and we can start today. In Jesus’ name. Amen.