

“Resisting the Powers”

Luke 4.1–13

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Congregational UCC, 29 Feb 04

This text provides us with the basis for the season of Lent, in which we spend 40 days trying to clarify our relationship with God and put God at the center of everything we do. That’s a tall order, and though we’re not aiming for *perfection* in our lives, we are aiming for *wholeness*.

I did some wondering about the character of “the devil” in this story, wondering if this was *ha-satan* – the Hebrew word for “advocate” or “challenger” – whom we meet in the book of Job or if it’s some other demon. The Greek word used in Luke’s gospel is *diabolos*, which means “devil.” There may be a relationship there, but I think it’s important for us to get past the personification and look at what’s going on in the story.

The devil isn’t offering anything bad, in and of itself – anything that we don’t already have in our nation: food, dominion, security. Who could want to deny Jesus any of those things? In some ways, the devil is there to provide Jesus what he needs. But, *oops*, there is a price tag attached to each offer: It’s all about worshipping something other than God.

For me it raises the question, “Is evil real?” I’m going to hazard a guess that most of you think it is. But I wonder if I’d asked you that question before 9/11 what you’d have answered. And for those of you who are old enough to remember the Holocaust, I wonder how you’d have answered before that horrific chapter in human history.

Those are two macro events that reflect evil. Maybe there isn’t a personification of evil – though Osama bin Laden and Adolf Hitler have certainly been cast in that light – but think beyond an individual to a force. (Kind of like the Dark Side in the *Star Wars* movies.) I think evil exists as a force in the universe, and I think that it provides us with challenges and temptations that are a lot less overt and a lot more attractive than Osama or Hitler.

The guises of evil can be obvious or sublime. There are ways in which evil persuades us to abandon our best and truest selves for the glories of worshipping something other than God.

You may have seen a really slick ad that’s been running on television lately for Land Rover. Two young college students are hitchhiking through Europe and talking about studying the humanities when they’re picked up by a beautiful Swiss couple in an equally beautiful new Land Rover with a satellite navigation system and a great stereo. The two students exchange glances and decide to opt for a college major that might allow them to earn enough to buy a new Rover.

Is there evil in that? There is nothing inherently wrong or evil in owning a Land Rover; it’s what you have to do in exchange that may be driven by evil. Do you need to sacrifice your true calling? Do you sacrifice your equilibrium by getting deeply into debt with car payments, so that you can’t do other, more worthy things with your money? Do you get duped by slick ads that tell you that you are not a worthy person if you don’t have a great car, a perfectly white smile, the best mood-enhancing prescription drug?

You are worthy and loved by God without any of it! “One does not live by bread alone.”

Walter Wink, a brilliant biblical scholar, writes, “I had never been able to take demons seriously. The idea that fallen angels possessed people seemed superstitious. But if the demon is spirituality produced when the angel [or ethos or culture] of an

institution turns its back on its divine vocation, then I could not only believe in the demonic, I could point to its presence in everyday life.”¹

The 19th century British historian Lord Acton coined the familiar axiom, “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Acton takes a rather dim view of humanity and doesn’t seem to have a lot of faith in human nature, but then again, a couple of World Wars seem to bear out his skepticism.

But, let’s look back at Luke’s gospel. *Jesus had absolute power*, and the devil is testing him to use it inappropriately. Power is **not** a bad thing in and of itself. It is the temptation to corruption and acceptance of that corruption that signifies evil.

Paul writes to the early church in Rome, “I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, *nor principalities, nor powers*, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God.”² Paul has *institutions* in mind when he talks about “powers,” and no modern theologian has dealt with “The Powers” as extensively and insightfully as Walter Wink. He wrote a brilliant trilogy on the topic,³ which I’d recommend to you as well as a brief condensation of the trilogy, called *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium*.

For Wink, the powers are very real forces. He writes that “Corporations and governments are ‘creatures’ whose sole purpose is to serve the general welfare. And when they refuse to do so, their spirituality becomes diseased. They become ‘demonic.’”⁴ Now, that’s pretty strong language. When I read that again, I thought about some reports I’d heard of an adult education forum here at Plymouth in which some of our members reportedly made very broad statements about the evils of corporate America. And I think it’s important to understand that corporations, governments, and people are not inherently evil.

When we – individually or collectively – begin to lose the spirit of our noblest calling and purpose, when we use our power inappropriately, when we accept “bargains with the devil” for bread and dominion and security, it is at that point that the tide turns and that evil gets a hold of us.

Let me put it a different way: Corporations are not evil. Do they do good things? Do they do bad things? Governments are not evil. Do they do good things? Do they do bad things? Universities are not evil. Churches are not evil. Science is not evil. People are not evil. But, each of them is *vulnerable to the influence of evil*.

Wink writes that “The Powers are good. The Powers are fallen. The Powers must be redeemed....The Powers are inextricably locked into God’s system, whose human face is revealed by Jesus.... Nothing is outside the redemptive care and transforming love of God. The Powers are not intrinsically evil; they are only fallen. Fallen does not mean depraved...it simply refers to the fact that our existence is not our essence: we are, none of us, what we are meant to be. We are alienated from God, each other, nature, and our

¹ Walter Wink, *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium*. (Augsburg Fortress, 1998), p. 5-6.

² Romans 8.37-38 (KJV)

³ *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Fortress, 1984), *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces that Determine Human Existence* (Fortress, 1986), and *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Fortress, 1992)

⁴ Wink, *The Powers that Be*, p. 5.

own souls, and cannot find the way back by ourselves. But the situation is not without hope, for what sinks can be made to rise again.”⁵

He also asserts that when the Powers line up, almost as if lining up in formation, they become “domination systems.” What were the domination systems of Jesus’ day? Well, if you’ve read any reviews of Mel Gibson’s new movie or if you’ve read any of the four gospels, you’ll be able to identify two: the Temple hierarchy (the scribes, Pharisees, high priests) and the Roman Empire. There is a lot of public controversy about which of the domination systems put Jesus to death (though they never refer to “domination systems” – or whether God ordained that Jesus “had to die.” That’s a sermon for another day soon, but think of it this way: how did these two domination systems use violence to eliminate their enemies? The temple hierarchy executed blasphemers by stoning; the Romans executed political prisoners by crucifixion.

So, where is the domination system today? Before you rush to judgment and start pointing fingers at corporations or the World Bank or any governmental body, I’d ask you to pause and reflect on Wink’s words: “The Powers are good. The Powers are fallen. The Powers must be redeemed.”



The more power we have, the more we need to be aware of our own power and how we use it: whether we are being true to our essence, our mission, our divine calling. Luke’s gospel reminds us that “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.”⁶ ***Much is expected of us.***

The religious right makes a lot of noise about the United States being a “Christian nation,” and certainly we have a comparatively large percentage of people who attend churches. What would our national behavior – our domestic social agenda and our foreign policy – look like if we used the life and teachings of Jesus as our guide? How would this wealthiest nation ever known on the face of the planet use its resources to eradicate hunger, poverty, and ignorance? How would this sole superpower use its global influence to encourage peace, the self-determination of nations (as Woodrow Wilson put it), and to ensure that all God’s children had adequate food, healthcare, education, and sustainable infrastructure? How would this nation take great pains to care for God’s world and its resources for our own and for future generations?

Are there aspects of our national life that look more like the domination system and less like the kingdom of God? That’s for you to decide.

A key aspect of domination systems, Wink asserts, is the reliance upon “the myth of redemptive violence.” He says, “it enshrines the belief that violence saves, that war brings peace, that might makes right. It is one of the oldest continuously repeated stories in the world.”⁷ The myth of redemptive violence is what made it possible for the Romans to crucify Jesus, it makes it possible for religious fanatics to fly airplanes into skyscrapers, and it makes pre-emptive war seem reasonable. “The myth of redemptive violence is the real myth of the modern world. It, and not Judaism or Christianity or Islam, is the dominant religion in our society today.”⁸

So, where is the hope? It is in several places. Paul says that nothing – not powers, not principalities – nothing – can separate us from the love of God. And ***he’s right!*** We

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 53.

⁶ Lk. 12.48

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 42.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 42

need to do what Jesus did: we need to “worship the Lord our God, and serve God **only**.” We need to claim our power. Wink says that “the New Testament insists that demons can have no impact on us unless they are able to embody themselves in people, pigs, or political systems.”⁹ So, be aware of whom and what you worship. And we need to recognize our own power.

In his inaugural address, Nelson Mandela quoted Marianne Williamson, the contemporary American author, who penned these words: “Our worst fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.... You are a child of God; your playing small doesn’t serve the world.... We were born to manifest the glory of God... within us. It is not in just some of us. It is in everyone, and as we let our own light shine we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.”

And we need to nurture our spiritual growth – our relationship with God, the holy, the sacred, the numinous, the true essence of the universe – through prayer. “Prayer is the field hospital in which the spiritual diseases that we have contracted from the Powers can be diagnosed and treated.”¹⁰ Every time you say the Lord’s Prayer, say it with conviction: that God’s will be done and God’s kingdom – God’s domination-free order – come on earth. And when we are led into temptation, God will help deliver us from evil and into the Kingdom of God.

The leaders of the civil rights struggle in this country did not lose hope, nor did the opponents of apartheid in South Africa, so how can we – a powerful people – lose hope?

Remember these words: “History belongs to the intercessors who believe the future into being.”¹¹

Amen.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 182.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 185.