

“Who is your Enemy?”

Sermon by Dan Harrison, Pastor, Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA 2/28/2021

Mark 1:12-13

Who is your enemy? Who is keeping you from being happy? Who is robbing you of your joy? Who is YOUR enemy? We each have one. I bet it wouldn't take much for each of us to stop and think about who it is that causes us the most pain for us in this life, the most heartache. I can nearly guarantee that our mind is quick to conjure up images of folks that we feel bear responsibility for our own deep sadness. In that case, who is YOUR enemy?

In this period of Lent we draw on the experience of our own Messiah's struggle for forty days and forty nights in the wilderness alone. In his solitude and depravation of luxuries, even abstaining from simple sustenance, we see Jesus confronting HIS biggest enemy. Let us look at the Matthew passage of his temptations together this morning. (Matthew 4:1-11)

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written: “God will command angels concerning you and they will lift you up in their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.” Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”

Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and only God shall you serve.’” Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

The passage is not complicated. The semantic choice and syntactic approach are all within reach of anyone who reads it, in any language. The narrative is clear, or it seems to be. Literary analysis would immediately place Jesus as the protagonist and Satan as the antagonist. If we were to surface read this story, I would think that most of us would be quick to call Jesus the Hero and Satan the obvious Enemy. And many of us have done exactly that... even since our childhood, when perhaps learning this story in Sunday school. It was even maybe in those formative, impressionable moments that we began to develop a subconscious attribution of “the bad things that happen to me” to a tangible enemy—“Satan” himself. For a lot of us this was a convenient strategy, and many of us adopted and held onto it for a good portion of our lives (even if not consciously aware of it), maybe even to this day, giving rise to the idea “the devil made me do it,” or even in a fit of rage telling our loved ones regrettably – as is my own case – the famous quote from Jesus to Peter “Get thee behind me Satan!” when trying to talk Jesus out of imminent execution. Through this perspective, the perceived enemy is clearly Satan and all that Satan embodies. The apostle Paul did not shy away in describing the Christian walk as a series of battles, not against flesh and bone but against spiritual realms of darkness (Eph 6:12). But let us look at Jesus' own battle during his series of temptations and unpack who the enemy really was and where the enemy currently resides.

The passage in Matthew tells us that Jesus had fasted for forty days by the time the “tempter” came, encouraging him to change the stones to bread so that he could eat. Jesus retorted, “Humans shall not live on just bread, but on God’s words.” Who was the enemy in that scenario? I don’t mean to make light of Satan’s role, I just want to expose what the actual temptation entailed so that we can learn the moral of the story. Many of us were taught the moral of the story was simply not to listen to Satan’s lie. Actually, Satan didn’t tell a lie here, I believe because that isn’t the point of this particular story, not because I believe Satan is a figurative truth-teller, ok? Instead, he challenges Jesus to show his power and I would say most importantly he challenges him to satisfy his hunger. Why? Because Jesus was hungry but he had made a commitment to God not to eat yet. Satan was exposing his weakness for food at that moment, his perceived need for sustenance... his fear that he couldn’t survive without it. I believe that was the enemy at that moment, Jesus’ potential doubt—**Jesus’ fear of not surviving without food.**

The next temptation is a little harder, but takes full advantage of Jesus’ weakened state and the absolute misery he must have felt at that moment; otherwise the next part wouldn’t even have been a real temptation. It seems Satan recognizes Jesus is at the lowest point of his life, physically, emotionally, spiritually—so he offers him an out. “If you’re really the Messiah, then you can attempt to kill yourself and God will spare you, right? So, do it. Do it.” Jesus eventually responds “we shouldn’t tempt God like that.” But who was the enemy here? Even when Jesus tells Peter “Get thee behind me Satan” (Matt 16:23) years later as he contemplates going to the cross—was Peter Jesus’ enemy? No. Satan? No. Satan is the “tempter,” remember? Satan tempts Jesus to end his misery and have God prove his love for him. Suicide. Yes, like many who contemplate it as a cry for help, a last desperate attempt for affection. Satan was exploiting Jesus’ potential doubts—**Jesus’ own fear of not really being loved.**

Finally, Satan shows Jesus that he can have all the land and riches as far as the eye can see, if he would simply bow down and worship him. What does wealth on this earth represent for Jesus: security, both economic and military. As opposed to what? Insecurity, vulnerability, defenselessness, homelessness. Was Satan the enemy at that moment or was it Jesus’ potential doubts that God would provide for his needs?—**his fear of living in constant insecurity, defenseless, exposed, poor.**

He resisted, but the operative word was “resisted,” telling Satan that he is to only serve the Lord his God and no other. Eventually, it says, Satan leaves him alone and the angels attend to him. How many of us are in the wilderness struggling right now, how many of us feel alone and desperate? Or at least can relate to how it feels... How many of us are ready for angels to attend to our doubts, our fears, and help us along the journey? Many of us... I am sure. We become each other’s angels. We lift each other up, like soldiers carrying the wounded off the battlefield for treatment and healing. The enemy is not Satan as much as it is our own fear. We are often the greatest enemy to our own progress spiritually, our doubts, our fears. God, help us to overcome them. Help us to see clearly the enemy in our midst... our own struggles of faith. Give us the tenacity to resist temptation when it comes, to expose the fears much like Satan did for Jesus so long ago, may we see clearly the crossroads and choose not to fear, choose not to doubt, choose instead to live into our faith in you and in each other. In your precious name we ask this, Amen.