

MAY 25, 2025

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON May 18- "God Is Bigger Than the Boogeyman" - John 8:39-47, Ephesians 6:10-13

This morning we're going to look into something directly that we typically note at times but I don't know that we've considered in a stand alone message. The devil.

The devil, satan, old scratch, Beelzebub, Belial, the father of lies, prince of darkness, God of this world, whatever you want to call the figure is very present in much of modern Christianity. The figure is used to scare people and associated with the torment of hell, differently depending on with whom you speak. The theology of the devil is also ripe with incongruity.

Literature, film and the like have painted pictures and myth around the devil that has worked its way into Christian understanding and theology. Literally this week I've seen multiple pastors playing up the power and fear about demons and the devil, claiming to see demons and spirits alive and at work in the midst of even a sanctuary. In one instance it was one pastor on stage calling out another pastor in front of his congregation.

The boogeyman is high and mighty to many Christians. So where do we even disagree with ourselves? A basic one that most I think know isn't accurate is that the devil is the ruler of hell. There's nothing scriptural about this. The devil isn't the grand punisher and warden of eternal damnation. Yet even our theology of hell isn't consistent. Looking at hell as the Gehenna of the gospels, where the fire isn't quenched and the worm doesn't die" is seen as eternal punishment while the lake of fire in Revelation also equated with hell suggests that punishment isn't eternal, but rather the consequence is complete and utter destruction.

A theology of angels suggests that something that separates us from the angels is free will, the power of choice. We were created to have this gift while angels are created to simply obey orders. They have no will of their own. Yet the same who hold to this claim that the devil is an angel who rebelled against God.

Either angels have free will or they don't. To say it's only the devil that rebelled is to further disagree with that same theology that suggests that other angels were also persuaded to rebel.

Often we hear that God is in control. The same theology that makes this claim will also claim that the devil has reign over the earth for a time now. Which is it? Is God in control or is the devil? It can't be both because the concept of control and reign in these cases is absolute.

The statement is made that "the devil is everywhere". At the same time one of the attributes of God that is God's alone is that God is omnipresent, everywhere at once.

We talk about the power of being in Christ. That we need have no fear when we are in Him. We are comforted by the Holy Spirit and frequently hear people praying a "hedge of protection". At the same time we're told to be afraid because we need to be looking for the devil everywhere and stay on guard. To an almost paranoid extent the notion that the devil is seeking us down, watching us to plan attack after attack, is part of people's faith.

When life is going wrong people will say "it's the devil attacking". But only when it's convenient. There's so much lack of agreement in the theology around the devil in Christianity.

So why is the devil such a point of fascination? I suggest that in many ways we need some physical, almost tangible target to focus on. The devil and his demons are the outside force that we can point to when we make mistakes.

The armor of God in Ephesians is a wonderful example of physical imagery used to make a spiritual point.

It is listed and some go so far as to encourage that we need to intentionally put on this armor every day in order to stay safe from the wiles of the devil. The passage we read supports the sense that there are forces of evil at work around us. This is what Paul references in the powers that are beyond "flesh and blood".

All of this imagery is helpful to give us something to aim at when talking about evil and sin. And perhaps there is a ringleader of evil in the devil. Even so, is all the attention, fear mongering around him, and air time really what we need to stay in God's graces?

Focusing here is convenient when fear becomes the easy, go to method to keep people in line with the faith. It makes for fiery sermons and keeps people on edge to be suspicious of anything that doesn't fit what is coming from the pulpit directly. It's good to keep people divided from family and neighbors out of spiritual concern for what they may be dabbling in. It also is handy to convince people that they are morally superior because they are so vigilant to stay above the fray of the devil and his demons. None of this is helpful in making the primary focus God in our lives. If so much attention is given to the devil, God becomes smaller and weaker in our minds. All that power and notoriety given to the devil and demons is glory, power, and honor stolen from God.

When we talk about the armor of God, why is it in the context of fear? Instead, aren't we better on simply focusing on making truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and knowing the Word of God central habits in who we are? Habits that are so committed they are reflexive?

There are a couple things from our readings and the name satan or devil that are instructive and helpful in gaining a practical attitude towards all of the spiritual talk. Yes, we need to understand that there is spirit and all that goes with it. At the same time we have to recognize that where the rubber meets the road, what we do about it in word and deed is what matters.

Too often the devil becomes a scapegoat for our own mistakes and poor values. "The devil made me do it." This goes to the point of pastors being given a pass for mistreating people and the victims being blamed. "Oh, the pastor was under attack by the devil and so and so let herself be used by the devil to make him fall." Give me a break.

This is the impractical. Point to something else to ease our own responsibility.

In John, this contrast between Abraham as father and the "father of lies" is playing at a bigger conversation with Judaism at the time. There were writings and groups that were increasingly upset that there were Jews that were defining their faith differently. They were accused of following the lies of "Balaam" or "the wicked priest" who were deceiving them away. The language here is in keeping with that conversation.

The devil is the liar drawing people away from what was genuinely intended and taught.

In fact the terms used that are translated "satan" and the "devil" themselves all have similar if not the same definition. Just like "sin" has been sensationalized from the simple definition of "missing the mark", so has this label. The terms simply mean accuser, adversary, or even tempter.

People are the ones who have more formalized the term into a proper name. That name is given to the one who is seen as chief among those spirits that do what the name actually means in definition.

As I said, the key here is what does all of this mean in practice?

At the end of the day it doesn't matter what we call it. Is it the devil? Demons? Temptation? An adversary? The tempter tempts with the goal of accusing us of wrongdoing.

In practice there are many things that act as temptation. Sometimes it's an outside influence like a friend, a song, an advertisement, an offer or choice. Other times it's an internal circumstance. A thought, an urge, a desire, an emotion, a memory. All of these things can be a temptation.

A case in point is when Peter suggests to Jesus that Jesus won't, maybe even can't, die. Jesus says "get behind me Satan". What He is saying to Peter is "back off and don't tempt me".

The energy focused on being paranoid about the devil and demons can misdirect us from seeing the actual temptation in front of us.

One of the cliché reminders is that the devil appears as an "angel of light". This is often forgotten in practice. We look for the devil, or temptation in the places, values, people, and ideas someone else has told us are "ugly", or the "enemy". Not only does this serve to drive a wedge between people, it also causes us to forget that if we believe the "angel of light" caution we're not thinking about what temptation the people, ideas, and things that are attractive, convenient, or supportive of us are putting in our path.

What is the remedy?

It's simpler than we are at times led to believe. The word is discernment.

In choices, actions, words look to Christ. Look to His example and his lessons. Then choose in keeping with that.

Simple. But not always easy.

To focus, to hear the Spirit, we need to do the opposite of getting amped up about the boogeyman. What we need is clarity of thinking. We need a sense of calm so that we can really test what is in front of us or stirred up within us.

In a world where people have intention to stir us up, we must breathe, look at what is before us as objectively as possible, and see what is actually on the table.

In a world where we are conditioned to “forget the past and just move forward”, we must take a moment to know the past so we can do better today and tomorrow.

In a world where people want more loyalty than honesty, we must consider where our loyalties lie. Am I loyal to Christ above all? The test comes when my choices are between what someone else is pushing me towards and where Jesus wants my heart and actions to lie.

I was in a conversation recently about science, faith, and actions. In terms of how the world around me is affected, the decision making process most people have no clue about. What they see and feel is how I act and speak in real time.

Will I point them towards God or be one more devilish influence? Will I be for Christ or anti Christ?

In all of this, notice that the boogeyman isn't in the consideration. The only role the devil has is the temptation to step away from God's desire. That's it. The rest is what I do with that temptation. That process must be focused on God and God alone. Anything else gums up the works and is a distraction.

There is no reason to fear the devil. Don't get scared. Get prepared. Know to whom we belong and follow Him. Know what scripture actually says and what it doesn't say. Learn to set ourselves apart from the emotion and distraction that are used to persuade us against what is right. Recognize that just as often as those we disagree with might tempt us into the wrong, those we agree with can do the same just as frequently.

Remember scriptures like “if God be for us who can stand against us?” “Whatever is good and pure, think on these things.” “I am with you until the end of the age.” “Resist the devil and he will flee.”

The power has never rested with the devil. It's always rested with God and in Christ. We say that “Jesus broke the power of sin.” If this is true there is nothing to fear. Just keep fixed on Him.

I'd like to leave you today with something that may seem, and even be, childish. My hope is that it will stick in your mind, and if tempted to balk in fear of the devil remind you that “God is bigger than the boogeyman”.

BIBLE STUDY—2 Samuel 23

As we wind down the book of 2 Samuel we are struck with the “last words” of David. Immediately we are reminded either that this is out of order, or not meant to be taken literally as even into 1 Kings David still has some things to say. Regardless, these words are of note because they are a mix of David and God.

It begins with an odd introduction from the one doing the speaking. David may seem to be exalting himself, but this is not the case. Rather David is having the actual words of God spoken through him and so to make this point the language is quite lofty. Verses 2 and 3 make this point directly.

We can read 2-4 and 6-7 omitting vs. 5 and it reads almost perfectly. It flows. There is the intro that God is speaking, verse about how the righteous king is a bright beacon followed by how evil men are to be explicitly disposed of. It is a beautiful, poetic way of describing the good of a good king and what should be done with an evil one.

Verse 5 seems to be David inserting himself into the mix with a statement about his own family, and God's covenant with him. Naturally he must be innocent and good given the great victories God has given to him. As in Chapter 22, we know that his claim of innocence is false. He is far from it. As in Chapter 22, our knowledge of reality is what provides a glimmer of hope.

Even when David has not acted rightly, God has made up the difference for Israel. Despite David's mistakes and faults, Israel has thrived, come together as a unified power, and has a name for herself among the nations. This is the benefit of having a king with whom God has entered into covenant. God will always uphold God's end, and on God's end is the promise of an everlasting rule for the house of David.

Saul had no such covenant with God and his family has largely slid into obscurity. David's heart being bent towards God has secured a relationship and promise that Saul's hard headedness and self centeredness could not.

The two descriptions on either side of verse 5 actually honor David's participation in both realities. In David's faithfulness he was a bright and noble leader for the people. When David fell away in sin, he created circumstances where he was laid low, chased away by his own son, and was a victim of war and circumstance. He was both elevated and cast aside just as the oracle proclaims.

After the oracle, we get the stories of David's mighty men. We see familiar names like Asahel, Abishai, Elhanan, and Uriah. These are the warriors that helped David in his victories throughout his many adventures during his lifetime. They remind us that he, as with us all, didn't climb to the top on his own. He had help. Yes, God was with him and provided strength, guidance and aid. God also provided him people on whom he could rely and who were gifted and skilled to help David make his way. With Eleazar and Shammah we see it noted that it was "the LORD who granted victory" in their battles. They participated in the benefit of God as they served David. Three of them were strong enough to be lumped together as a trio of renown. Abishai was their commander.

In honoring these men, there is a strange story about the mighty three. David was thirsty and longed for a drink from a well. Risking life and limb these three broke through the enemy line to fetch David that water only to have David refuse to drink it when they returned. This to most of us sounds ignorant and ungrateful. The language of the story demonstrates something else.

This story communicates several things. It shows us the dedication and love David's men have for him and one another. It also shows David's deep and abiding love for the men despite what it might look like on the surface. David connects his relationship to his men with faithfulness to God in this scene. David's comment is that this water isn't water. It represents the blood of the men that brought it to him. It represents their love and dedication. What it represents has transformed this liquid beyond mere water. It isn't suitable or proper to consume it crassly just to quench some thirst or indulge a want. It must be treated with the honor that what it represents deserves. Therefore it must be treated as sacramental and only fit to be offered to God. David pours it out as a drink offering to God in honor of his men.

This is the David of old. This is the David that commanded the loyalty of his men and of a nation. This is the David after God's own heart. This is the David that remains despite his sin and failures as he will always be drawn back to his God.

The group of men is David's elite fighting force. There is no rounding up or down. The number is 37. They are afforded distinction. Rightly so as they have walked with David through terrible times. In their number, the last to be mentioned is telling. It is Uriah the Hittite, Bathsheba's husband whom David had killed.

The placement doesn't put Uriah at the bottom of the heap. Instead it is a reminder. David's path has been up and down. It's been rocky. Uriah was one of David's best yet part of David's most well known sin and shame. He is a king of contrasts and we don't forget this. There is much victory and glory, yet also many downfalls and places of falling away.

Though it's subtle in the reminding, there is both caution and encouragement. Be careful not to let success and the pursuit of even the best of goals cause us to stumble and step away from what is pleasing to God. At the same time, take hope that though all of us will stumble, God remains faithful and present. Forgiveness is readily there even in the midst of consequence. And great things can be accomplished through even the most imperfect of us when God is at the center and core of our lives and hearts.

situation not because of who we were in the moment, but because of who we would become after the fact. The God that delivered and imperfect David can and will deliver an imperfect me and you.

The chapter finishes with David once again returning to lavish praise on God for God's faithfulness to him. While David uplifts himself to a degree in the center of the chapter, declaring his own innocence, that isn't where he leaves it. It would be inappropriate for this song of praise to end with the focus on David. It returns to focusing on the one who brought him to where he is, making sure that the focus is properly placed.

As 2 Samuel is coming to a close, we are reminded of the long story that came before. The message is clear. No matter how long and hard the journey, look to God for strength, guidance, and deliverance. We know that it might not always come in the form that we ask. We may not understand the moment to moment. But when we grow older, if we have sought God through it all, we too can see how God worked through good, bad, thick and thin to create who we have become.