



August 31, 2008`

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Romans 12:1-2, 9-21

“Angels and Demons”

I grew up with Mickey Mouse, and I remember flashes of scenes from those cartoons. Say Mickey was wrestling with temptation of some kind, and there, perched on his shoulder, would be a little mouse dressed in white with wings and a halo. That little mouse would whisper in his ear, beseeching him to do good. And immediately, perched on his other shoulder, another little mouse would speak. This mouse would have a pitchfork and horns growing on the top of his head. He would slyly propose all kinds of mischief.

Do you ever feel like there are angels and devils perched on your shoulder? They have lots of advice when you're in the midst of a sticky situation. It can be hard to recognize which is which, and what you should listen to, and what you should reject.

I've noticed something interesting in our culture. There are a couple fads that kind of match up with those cartoon angels and devils on our shoulders.

First, there's the “Gothic” fad. You see it in clothing, art, music, jewelry, posters, room décor. There are medieval kinds of images that recur—things like grimacing gargoyles and skeletons, skulls, weapons and instruments of torture. Clothing and decorations are black, dark, metallic. People embracing the Gothic style dye their hair black, wear silver body piercing ornaments, or dark tattoos. There's a rebellious spirit in this movement, a kind of “waywardness” that rejects the norm.

Then we have the “angel” corner of our culture. Again, it appears in clothing, art, music, jewelry, posters, room décor. The images are golden, bright, lacy, fluffy, puffy, pretty, and pastel. Bells tinkle in wind chimes, crystals sparkle and reflect light. There's a simplistic kind of “inwardness” we often find in this movement—a

focus on self that embraces angels as long as they are pretty little things that don't challenge our way of life or sense of self-importance.

Now I want to make this clear, there are people with good hearts in each of these groups. But I believe, for many of them, they are looking for something that neither of these styles can provide: safety, power, and answers for living.

Friends, embracing darkness and scary gore is EASIER than dealing with REAL LIFE scary things: like the addictions of family members or friends, the divorce of parents, the octopus-like reach of tentacles of terrorism in our world. We are powerless to "fix" these kinds of problems. They are out of our control. We can escape into a "waywardness" of clothing styles or tattoos that WE can control.

The same kinds of struggles and fears can lead us the other direction- towards things that are pretty, sweet and shiny. But they have no more power to banish our fears than things that are dark and ugly. They represent a kind of "lite" spirituality that is like cotton candy, sweet and pretty, but without any substance and ultimately kind of nauseating.

Each of these paths represent attempts to say, "I'm unique; I'm special." The dark road invites us to be different than the norm by rejecting it. The bright world tells us that we are just a bit more spiritual than the norm and therefore beyond it.

Rev. Leonard Sweet has reflected on this:

Part of the wide-eyed appeal of the Gothic in our culture is its very popularity. How we love knowing that our venture into waywardness is not only easy, but is well-traveled. You think the need to "fit in", to be a part of what everyone else is doing, seeing, talking about, is just another teenage phenomenon? It is a desire that tugs at all of us throughout our lives.

Easy waywardness as well as easy inwardness appeal to us because anybody can do it- and so everybody is doing it. Both have become coated over with a thick, sugary layer of ordinariness.

-How "horrible" is a horror movie when it is the standard Saturday night fare of 14 year old girls at their slumber parties?

-How "shocking" is shock-talk radio when it keeps droning on all the while we're stuck in commuter traffic?

-How extraordinary are the stories of space aliens, real-life vampires.....when we casually peruse them while waiting in the grocery store checkout line?

African American preacher Brad Ronnell Braxton, pastor of the Douglas Memorial Community Church in Baltimore, argues that, “The greatest temptation is not money, sex or power, but..... the temptation to be ordinary, to be like everybody else!.....The greatest temptation of Satan is the temptation for the people of God to misuse and abuse their God-ordained power and status by getting trapped in being ordinary.”

The Bible tells us we are not to be “conformed to this world”, but transformed by God’s Spirit. Even on what we may see as the “fringes” of our culture, we are often, unwittingly, still conforming to rules and patterns of this world.

Friends, neither the cultural “angels” nor the cultural “demons” of our time are the way to find safety or meaning in life. The uniqueness of Jesus IS.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is anything but ordinary. Today’s epistle helps us understand this. (Read from text aloud.)

We are called to be like Jesus, which means we are called to be weird. And we are promised we will change the world by that weirdness. And we are informed that nothing BUT Jesus’ weirdness WILL change the world.

Friends, don’t take the easy way out. Don’t embrace our reigning cultural schemes of waywardness or inwardness- schemes to banish our fears and help us feel good about ourselves.

Jesus does not call us to be wayward or inward. He does call us to be outward and upward. Jesus has given us our WAY, our TRUTH and our LIFE. They are not an easy WAY, TRUTH, or LIFE. They are not an ordinary WAY, TRUTH or LIFE. They are a bit weird, in the world’s eyes. Are we ready to be a little bit weird? He promises us we WILL be safe (in an ULTIMATE way), and ULTIMATELY find meaning in life. We would prefer IMMEDIATE safety and IMMEDIATE meaning. But no matter WHAT we try, we won’t have those. Life just doesn’t work like that. We don’t have the power to FORCE life to give us immediate safety and immediate meaning. But Jesus says, “Come with me. Live like me. And you WILL find what you seek. I promise.”

AMEN!