

February 21, 2010

Romans 7:15-20, 24

Luke 4:1-13

“What about Satan?”

Over the past several decades of my adult life, I have been intrigued by the evolving changes in ways we communicate. “Messaging” is a new verb. And “messaging” is becoming more and more concise. I remember the first time I replied to one of my adult kids’ text messages, I was so proud! And when I replied with an enthusiastic “GREAT!” to one message, using only three symbols: the letter “g”, the letter “r”, and the numeral “8”, I was even more proud! I do wonder about the downside of our changing ways of communicating, but I have to say I saw the benefit of text messaging when my daughter texted me throughout her labor and delivery of our second grandson!

Sometimes the brevity of the message, actually has immense power. That is true in the case of SYMBOLS. A symbol is just one mark, one image, one entity, but it often stands for an entire catalogue of messages. And they travel across national boundaries, cultures and languages.

One such symbol, that you will see on t-shirts across the globe is the Nike logo. In Greek mythology Nike was the sister of Cratos, Bia and Zeus, the gods of strength, power and zeal. Nike was the goddess of victory. Rev. Joanna Adams has noted that “some years ago an art student named Caroline Richardson was commissioned for the grand sum of \$35 to design a symbol for Nike. She came up with the *swoosh* which has become one of the most widely recognized symbols in all of human history...This dynamic curve evokes speed, flight and victory... values that our society clearly holds most dear.”

Who could object to such a simple, yet powerful symbol? Theologian Iwan Russell-Jones sees the swoosh as a symbol that emerges from a culture that has lost its values. “Our modern world,” he says, has become a “world in which, as one football coach...put it, ‘winning isn’t everything. It is the only thing.’” Russell-Jones sees Nike’s symbol as an emblem of what he describes as a “demonic reality, in which weakness, failure, sickness,...imperfection, poverty and powerlessness are ... viewed as moral evils” that must be banished from sight.

What other symbol comes to mind, that is also one simple image, that stands for an entire library of messages, and also travels and is recognized across national boundaries, cultures, and languages? How about the cross? The symbol of the Christian faith?

This cross also represents values, but ones very different from those represented by the “swoosh”. It speaks of service and sacrifice, of the mysterious paradox that one finds one’s life by losing it, that real life and true victory are found under the shadow of an instrument of execution.

The first Sunday in Lent goes right to the heart of the struggle that led to the cross. We hear of a contest between Jesus and a demonic reality whose name is Satan. Our faith teaches that the outcome of this contest between Jesus and Satan determines the rest of human history. Rev. Adams reflects upon this battle and the power of evil, of Satan:

These days, it is hard to find anyone who gives Satan a second thought. The other evening I asked a tableful of friends at a Chinese restaurant if any of them believed in Satan. (You have to do your sermon research any place you can.) One of them said, “Yes.” One said, “Maybe.” And the rest looked at me as if they wished I would just eat my egg roll and mind my own business. The truth is that their uneasiness with my question was the most helpful thing to come out of the whole conversation. People ought to be uneasy talking about Satan...

[The Gospel] forces us to ask the ... question of whether or not evil exists, and whether it is aggressively at work in the world against God and humanity. This is the real question, and the answer to it is infinitely more important than the answer to the question of whether or not Satan is a literal, actual being. If you choose to believe that, it is all right with me. As for myself, I fall more in the camp of those who see Satan as the personification of—the symbol of—those forces in the universe and in the human heart that are determined to thwart the purposes of God.

What about Satan? Today we don’t hear a lot of conversation about Satan. And if we do, it can get bogged down in the debate about whether or not there is a literal being of absolute evil or not. My personal thought is that Satan, being or symbol, loves it when we do that. Because when we do that kind of intellectual, theoretical debating we are not actively doing anything

at all to oppose evil! Through the debate we are seduced into ignoring evil's activity in the world.

We need to be aware of the reality of evil- a truth we ignore at our peril. The wilderness is real. We have all traveled through landscapes of life that are barren and inhospitable, where we wander without a compass, and hear promptings and temptings from every side. There are dark forces that assail us. There are dark forces within us.

Let's hear a bit more from Pastor Adams:

One does not have to live long in this world to realize that it is not Sunnybrook Farm, with just a problem or two... to be worked out. Neither Adolf Hitler nor the Holocaust can be explained away as an aberration...; neither can the deaths of 25 million soldiers and 60 million civilians during the two world wars of the twentieth century. I took two minutes and thought of other outbreaks of evil in my lifetime. My pen could not write fast enough--- the My Lai massacre, the Oklahoma City bombing,... the genocides in Rwanda and Eastern Europe...It has a life of its own, doesn't it?

One of the most difficult aspects of evil is that it rarely, if ever, presents itself as evil. It masquerades as reasonable, appealing, and justifiable. .. The Nazis thought it was all right to kill the Jews. Just look at who the Jews had killed.

I have a book I have not yet given to the Mission Book Fair if anyone would like to borrow it: ***The Nazi Doctors***. It describes the evolution of what was called "medicalized" killing, which moved from "mercy killing" of the terminally ill, to the disabled, to an entire ethnic group.

Joanna Adams continues:

One does not have to live long within one's own skin to realize that everything is not right within us as well... There is a dark force working against us that lives within us. Who can doubt it? Paul captures this painful reality in his Letter to the Romans-----...written...long after he had become a Christian. "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing that I hate...."

Evil is powerful and must be reckoned with. William Muehl, of Yale Divinity School, sums up the human story. “When we fell out of Eden,” he writes, “We did not land in the First Methodist Church. We landed in a primordial swamp—read ‘wilderness’—where life was ruled by raw power, and the exercise of conscience was a death wish. At this point God [had two] options: destroy us... or get down in the swamp and muck about in the mud with us... The cross makes ...[no] sense in Eden... it [only makes sense in] the swamp.”

There is evil in the world. There is evil in ourselves. What has God done about it? He came in the flesh to undergo great suffering and be rejected and killed, that he might be raised and through that offer us forgiveness and new life.

God also gives us ways to combat the forces of darkness around and within us.

First: keep your eyes on the cross.

I read of a young woman imprisoned and tortured in South America. As she wept in her cell, she looked out the barred window that held both vertical and horizontal bars. Through her tears, her eyes focused on one small section of the window. The light streaming in lit up a section shaped like the letter “t”, and in that moment she saw the cross. The memory of Christ’s suffering told her he knew and had tasted her suffering. The reminder of Christ’s victory over sin and death gave her hope. A peace that passed all understanding came over her.

Keep your eyes on the cross. Have faith that God’s power is greater than any other force in the universe—greater than any force at work against you. Hold on to your faith in God for dear life.

Next: Be realistic in your expectations. Remember that, in Adams’ words, “if Satan was after Jesus, Satan will surely be after you. Remember that goodness, of which Jesus had plenty, is no shield against temptation.” We need to learn profound humility when it comes to our vulnerability to sin and wrong. We too often lean on our own puny strength, ignoring the only power that can save us, the power of Christ.

Finally, reach for help beyond yourself. We cannot do anything alone. Nothing. We most especially cannot resist evil alone. REACH UP to God. And REACH OUT to other people. We need a power that is higher than ourselves, and a power that is broader than ourselves. This is the way God intends us to live. That is the only way we can navigate through the world, through this life, that is filled with dangers.

Instead of paddling with our personal tiny oars, we need to hoist our sails that they might fill with the mighty wind of God's Spirit, and join forces to each do our part in the sailing of the ship of life, the ship of faith. May God be our companion and our destination! AMEN.