

March 6, 2022

“Bearing You Up”
Sermon by Rev. Susan Drake

Scripture Readings

Psalm 91: 9–15

*For God will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.
On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.
You will tread on the lion and the adder,
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.
Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name.
When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble,
I will rescue them and honor them.*

Luke 4:1–13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” Jesus answered him, “It is written.” “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,

*‘He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you,’
and ‘On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*

Sermon “Bearing You Up”

This passage is one of those whose meaning can change for you a thousand times in your lifetime. Whether you read it literally, symbolically, or metaphorically all kinds of questions arise; who is the devil, who is your tempter, what do you consider evil, does a loving God actually test us?

This scripture has been one of the most argued and discussed passages throughout Christian history, academically, theologically, philosophically because it addresses those important questions like what is evil, does evil even exist, why if God created the world did God not create it without evil?

There are big words like theodicy, ontology, meta-ethics and so on for each of these different questions. There are theologians and ethicists and philosophers that have dedicated their entire lives to each of these different questions. Especially the problem of evil in the world and how we can know the difference between right and wrong and they all have theories.

But, now this is important, if anybody claims to know for certain the answer to these questions whether they have their doctorate in ethics, are a pastor, or just your blow-hard uncle— then you need to excuse yourself from that conversation because you are about to have to listen to a dissertation that can be reduced down to bologna.

When people claim to have these answers then they are truly participating in a religious idea that Karl Marx named when he coined the phrase “the opiate of the masses”. They are trying to give certainty to questions so that they don’t have to feel insecure in a world that is inherently uncertain.

Now if someone starts their theories with what if, or do you suppose or imagine if then I will stay and listen, then we will be participating in an ongoing dialogue that is so beautifully human, trying to figure it all out even when we can’t. In these dialogues I often feel the presence of God.

When I first started reading and taking a deep look at these questions I quickly dismissed the idea of the devil as an entity, a thrown out angel and then I started thinking that maybe evil didn’t even exist, maybe evil is just the absence of God or good in someone’s life.

Like maybe those who commit harmful acts just didn’t feel enough love or were bullied, but that doesn’t explain so many things. It doesn’t explain a kid with loving parents and community who ends up so full of hate and committing unspeakable crimes.

Granted trauma can certainly play a role in who we become, but dismissing evil as just the absence of God or good doesn’t explain generational racism, it doesn’t explain all isms and phobias that seem to never go away in our society. It doesn’t explain all the inequity and injustice and it certainly doesn’t explain why there are children cowered in bomb shelters right now and a how single person can threaten nuclear annihilation for us all.

It doesn't explain sex trafficking, or child abuse, or all the horrible and awful stuff that humans are capable of. It doesn't explain the last five years of hatred espoused politically for people who vote differently or the ability of humans to stay completely silent about egregious acts around the world.

I went from hippy happy "all you need is love" to believing that there truly is something evil in our midst, in our character and constructs, in our instincts, and in our fear that is trying to tempt us with the very things that the devil tempts Jesus with in this story: power and security.

I don't say that to be all doom and gloom because I do believe that God can lift us out of those desert places where we feel like we don't have any choice other than doing harm to ourselves or others.

Those places where someone has manipulated our baser instincts, our real need for security and belonging, into something not decent and certainly not good.

I'm certainly not going to tell you the difference between right and wrong, but the best I try to do is to "do no harm" and ask for God's help to do so.

It doesn't mean you aren't going to hurt people. We will inadvertently hurt people often in our life, like having to tell someone you don't want to date them, or telling someone you don't have time for them, but hurting people by living your life and intentionally seeking to hurt someone are two different things.

I think those times of finding ourselves in the wilderness are truly part of life. I don't believe that God or the devil guides us to the desert to test us but I do know that if I remain open to learning new things about myself and the world, it is often in the wildernesses of my life when I do learn and grow spiritually.

Being prayerful like Jesus is in this story, is the only thing that keeps me from getting lost. I ask for God's help before I make any major decisions and when I do, I can often see clearer what my answers are— and they are rarely as cut and dry at the dualistic notion of right or wrong.

The human brain is more comfortable with two choices and it loves to categorize things in right or wrong, and good or evil. But for me the best choices have often been something that emerges from the gray area after I have prayed and backed away from those feelings like "I have to make a decision right this second." Turning to God in prayer like Jesus does the entire time he is in the desert often reveals a third option that I couldn't see because my brain was too wound up in the fear of making the wrong decision.

I remember sometime in the seventies, I think it was Flip Wilson who came up with the phrase "The Devil Made Me Do It". I used that on my Mom a couple of times when I ate all the cookies or watched TV instead of doing my homework, but she didn't buy it. She knew better, as did I. It would be convenient to have some lesser God to blame our human misdeeds on, but in reality we will never have solutions to the problem of evil until we own that we are in charge of our own

behavior and created systems and have an incredible amount of God-given power to create loving solutions for ourselves and our world. May it be so. AMEN

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