

“Satan and the Arch Villains”

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; Luke 4:1-13

Part II of VI in the sermon series “Then and Now”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister

August 4, 2024

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

“Satan and the Arch Villains”

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; Luke 4:1-13

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 11, August 4, 2024, dedicated to the 140,000 men, women and children who perished in Nagasaki, Japan, on August 9, 1945, when the second atomic bomb was dropped on the city, and always to the glory of God!

+++++

*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock, and our salvation.
Amen.*

+++++

Near the end of the 2008 film about Batman – *The Dark Knight* – there is a scene that captures the essence of the Joker, the Clown Prince of Crime. The Joker has wired two tugboats with high explosives. At 11 p.m., he kills the engines in both and announces to each that they are set to explode at midnight. Each is filled with thousands of people crossing Gotham City’s harbor. However, each boat has a trigger, which if pulled, has the power to destroy the other and save themselves.

On one tug are criminals and prisoners from the Gotham City jails and Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane (Joker’s home whenever he has been caught). On the other tug are families with children, including some law officers who have put the criminals behind bars. He broadcasts to both boats who is on the other and this additional news. *“At exactly midnight I will blow up both tugboats. It is to your advantage to save yourselves before midnight.”*

For the next 60 minutes (clearly abbreviated in film time), we witness the two sets of people struggle with their existential decision to murder and live, or both be killed together. Everyone knows one thing: the Joker will kill them all. *He has no conscience when it comes to killing.*

As you watch this scene unfold, having witnessed the Joker create havoc for the 120 minutes already, you feel like you are watching the personification of evil on the screen. He is the “killing joke.” Moreover, this dangerous and unpredictable arch villain who invokes mass murder, malignancy and mayhem is only one of many who create chaos of this magnitude in the comics.

The comics are filled with arch villains who face off against the superheroes. In each case, there may be multiple arch villains for a superhero. For example, Batman battles the Riddler, the Penguin, Sandman and Solomon Grundy. But, each superhero has a special nemesis (the Joker is Batman’s). There is the Green Goblin in Spiderman; Lex Luther in Superman; and Magneto in X-Men; Giganta and Cheetah in Wonder Woman; Loki, the evil brother of Thor; Erik Killmonger for the Black Panther; Sinestro in the Green Lantern, and in the Battle for Earth, Thanos arrives intent on destroying half of humankind in order to “save the earth” and he faces the pantheon of Marvel superheroes. And how could I forget Red Skull, Doctor Doom, Carnage and Kingpin and the list of evildoers goes on...

Then there is “The Demon” who is a beast unto himself and first appeared in 1972 in a battle to rule the underworld. The Demon burst out of his mother’s womb and headed to the underworld so he could win the battle to rule over hell.

Although the Demon is the most extreme example, all the arch villains have a story of how they came into being. Each has turned to the power of darkness and evil for various reasons. Something inside of each has “snapped” and they have chosen a life of crime in response. Is it really evil we are witnessing in the arch villains or just a response to personal pain and trauma? We want to

believe each one can be turned around to see the light. We want to believe in redemption. Nevertheless, we are overwhelmed by the violence and destruction of these men and women.

As reflective people of faith, you and I often struggle to name evil for what it is. But, I believe it is no less than a life and death issue. In *People of the Lie*, M. Scott Peck came to his definition of evil through the eyes of his 8-year-old son, who approached him one day noting, “*Daddy, evil is ‘live’ spelled backward.*”

How true! **Evil stands in opposition to life.**

It is that which knowingly and systematically opposes the life force. It has to do with killing. Evil can kill the body. It can kill the soul. Evil can kill the spirit. It is a force residing either inside or outside of human beings that seek to kill life or liveliness. And goodness is its opposite. Goodness is the force – again – either inside or outside of human beings that seeks to give life, promote life, restore life and liveliness (drawn from Peck in *The People of the Lie*, pp. 42-43).

Evil is a real spirit of unreality. As human beings and as people of faith, we know the problem of evil has been with us since early times. Satan, as you know, is the “Father of Lies.” The word Satan means “adversary.” In her book, *The Origins of Satan*, Elaine Pagels writes:

“Satan evokes more than the greed, envy, lust and anger we identify with our own worst impulses, and more than what we call brutality, which to human beings a resemblance to animals (“Brutes.”).”

But, as you might guess, scripture paints a varied portrait of Satan over thousands of years of telling his story. As an actual being outside the reality of God, Satan appears only four times in the Old Testament (Zechariah 3:11ff, I Chronicles 21:1, Psalm 109:6, and then throughout the Book of Job). Beyond these four references, it was believed in Hebrew Scriptures, that God was the one responsible for both evil and good. Isaiah 45:5-7 (KJV) says

it most clearly: “*I am the Lord and there is no one else . . . I form the light and create the darkness. I make peace and I create evil; I the Lord do all these things.*” In other words, God is the totality of opposites.

Everything comes from God, including good and evil. For the ancient Hebrews there was no problem of good and evil. There was only one God who offered light and dark, blessings and curses, good and evil. This God was boldly and unflinchingly monotheistic. Satan, as an adversary, appeared as the shadow side of reality. In this image, the difference between light and dark, good and evil are not far apart.

While we may find the unabashed monotheism of Hebrew scriptures admirable, we may also be troubled by the idea that God is the source of all evil as well as the source of all good. Does God intend evil? Or is God amoral?

Evidently, we are not alone in our struggles. Over 400 years pass between the end of the Old and the beginning of the New Testament. Satan emerges in the new texts with a conspicuous role. Satan’s role is so significant in the New Testament that he has many names – 35 times he is referred to as Satan; 37 times he is the diabolos or devil; many times he called us “the enemy,” seven times he is referred to as “Beelzebub,” which means “the Lord of the Flies,” and refers to the Persian deity Ahriman.

The Gospel of John frequently refers to the devil and usually refers to him as “the prince of this world.” Satan continues to mean “*a being which hinders free, forward movement, an adversary, an accuser, a stumbling block.*” “Diabolos” is a Greek word used as the equivalent of Satan. In its literal meaning as a verb, “diabolos” means “*to throw across,*” as something would be thrown across our path to interfere with our progress. Satan is the one who creates chaos.

(Much of this material is drawn from John A. Sanford’s book, *Evil: The Shadow Side of Reality*, Crossroads Publishing, 1996, pp. 25-44).

Satan is responsible for a multitude of human ills. He sends physical ailing and sufferings upon humankind, such as the woman who could not stand erect in Luke 13 is said to be bound by Satan. He is also held responsible for mental afflictions and the torturing of humankind. When Jesus is in the wilderness in Luke 4, Satan accompanies him there and in the words of Jewish author, Chaim Hasas in his famous 1946 short story, *“That’s the Way the Goyim Are,”* Satan is called *“a bad impulse”* (reflecting, if you will, the Hebraic understanding of the devil working within each of us).

But Christian scriptures view Satan as much more than a bad impulse. Satan, as his names indicates, appears in the Gospels as the spirit opposed to God. Satan throws every obstacle he can in the path of human beings – with torment to body, mind, and soul. He seeks to separate humanity from God. He incites human beings to sin and rebellion against God – even, in the end, overtaking Judas as he sells Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. Rather than the simple and sometimes gray area of exchanging faces with God, Satan is a separate unimpeachable force against life.

We need to know the face of Satan when we see it. And once we have witnessed his face, we need to challenge its existence – with determination, courage, and care – so that we do not get sucked into it, but rather stand and speak boldly against it. We also need to be careful not to use the word or name evil when it is not actually there.

In his book, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, Charles Kimball names five warning signs of corruption leading any religion (in all manifestations – Christian, Islamic, Jewish, Hindu and others) to evil. His five signs are: absolute truth claims, blind obedience, establishing “THE ideal” time for action, justifying the end by any means and declaring holy war. The signs can be there if we but look at them. Once we become clear of the dangers of our task, we must pursue the battle against evil as those who stand in the full embrace of God’s love. We must be those who are FOR God and not simply AGAINST Evil.

In his 1952 book, *The Devils of Loudun*, Aldous Huxley describes the development of the psychology of evil in a small 17th century French town. Much like Arthur Miller's play, *The Crucible*, Huxley points out what can become of witch hunting. He writes:

"The effects which follow too constant and intense a concentration upon evil are always disastrous. Those who crusade not for God in themselves, but against (what they perceive as) the devil in others, never succeed in making the world better, but leave it either as it was, or something even perceptibly worse than it was before their crusade began. By thinking primarily of evil, we tend, however excellent our intentions, to create occasions for evil to manifest itself" (p. 192).

No person can concentrate their attention upon evil, or even upon the idea of evil, and remain unaffected. To be more against the devil than for God is dangerous. Every crusader is apt to go mad. They will be haunted by the wickedness they attribute to their enemies; they then become a part of you. (p. 260).

It is here that the comics have come to understand the complexity of Satan and evil. Each of the arch villains gets inside of their superhero opponents. They get under their skin and in their heads – sometimes they get into their blood system. They “become their shadow side,” to paraphrase psychologist Carl Jung. For the shadow is the psychological and spiritual concept that refers to the dark, feared, unwanted side of our personality.

Every one of us has a “shadow side” (I believe both psychologically and spiritually). Each of us needs to acknowledge and name our “shadow.” It is important to remember:

"...as each of us develops a conscious personality, we all seek to embody in ourselves a certain image of what we want to be like. Those qualities that could have become part of this conscious personality, but are not in accord with the person we want to be, are rejected and constitute the shadow personality" (John A. Sanford, *Evil: The Shadow Side of Reality*, p. 49).

The Apostle Paul was dealing with his shadow personality as he acknowledged the tumult of his soul in Romans 7:14ff. He wrote:

“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... I can see what is right. But, I cannot do it... Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Through the struggles of his soul, Paul points us to the answer of how to overcome evil with good. Assailed inside and outside, twisted and turned by the battle of his soul with evil, Paul proclaims that “God in Jesus Christ is our Lord,” is the way through darkness to light. I couldn’t agree more.

When faced with battles in our individual lives, we can find hope for our life in Jesus Christ who seeks to lead us out of darkness and into light. When I have stared evil in the eye (and friends I have looked evil in the eye on a number of occasions, with the hair standing up on the back of my neck), I have said, either aloud or under my breath the words of Jesus when he was faced with such danger: “Be gone Satan!” Invoking the name of Jesus, when saying these words, I have felt the power and presence of God to cut through the dangers.

In the end of *The Dark Knight*, as the clock strikes midnight... AND?!?!?! Just see the movie!

Overcoming evil with good. Ultimately it is all about the power of God’s love. Even as he faced his own shadow, his own demons, the Apostle Paul knew who saved him from the power of evil. He knew the source of his peace of heart and mind. In Phillipians 4:7, he writes: *“May the peace of God, which passes human understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”*

And now, may God strengthen you in every imaginable way, as you, in the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, overcome evil with good. Amen.

