

Who's the Enemy

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Who's the Enemy?

Exodus 32:1-6

There was this couple who were invited out to a formal retirement dinner for a friend and the wife needed a new dress for the party. They were living on a tight budget so they discussed and agreed ahead of time how much they thought she should spend on the new outfit. After an entire day of shopping the wife came home anxious to show her husband what she bought. While she was in the other room putting it on the husband happened to see the receipt in the bag and was a little distressed to see what she had spent. After a few minutes, the wife came out and spun around so her husband would get the full effect of the dress and he said, "Wow, honey you look great, but I have to tell you, I'm a little surprised to see what you paid for this." "Oh, I know," she said, "Isn't that terrible? It was a little more than we planned for but I searched all day and the minute I saw this nothing else compared, I just had to have it.... I think the devil made me do it." The husband thought for a second and said, "Why didn't you just say to him, Get behind me Satan." "Oh I did," she said, "And he told me that dress looked just as good on me from the back as it did from the front.... so I bought it."

Who's the enemy? Who is it that we need to be watching out for? A verse in I Peter says, "Be alert, your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."

The devil, who is also known by some other names like Lucifer and Satan, is the classic enemy from the Bible, the face of evil. Satan shows up first in the story of the Garden of Eden as a serpent and tempts Eve into eating the apple and sets the whole creation on a course for disaster. Then there is that strange story in the Old Testament about a righteous man named Job. God seems to have actually given Satan permission to tempt and curse Job and his family. The name Satan is Hebrew, but Satan does not show up too much in the Hebrew of the Old Testament other than in these two stories, He appears much more in the New Testament where the Greek word for Satan is *diabolos* which is where we get the English word devil.

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Satan in the New Testament is a being of great power and evil, the prince of darkness who reigns over all of the demons. New Testament stories of the devil include the one about him tempting Jesus in the desert. Right after Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist, the spirit descends on Jesus in the form of a dove and the voice of God announces that Jesus is God's beloved Son. Strangely, scripture says it is the spirit who leads Jesus into the desert for forty days where he is tempted by Satan to turn away from the very Father who just pronounced him beloved. Satan tries to get Jesus to use his own powers to save himself and to worship the devil to get even more power.

One of my favorite fiction books by C.S. Lewis exaggerates the human characteristics of Satan and suggests a fascinating idea of how it is that demons manage to influence us, the techniques they use against us. The book, "The Screwtape Letters," is a series of thirty one letters written by a senior demon named Screwtape. The letters are written to his nephew, a junior apprentice demon named Wormwood. The premise of the book is that every human being has their own personal demon assigned to them. Our demons know our weaknesses, they know which buttons to push and when to push them. They catch us when we are the most vulnerable to temptation. These demons use any method they can to eat away at our faith and promote sin in the world. It is a difficult book to read because you have to reverse your morality so that what you normally think of as good and just, becomes wrong and evil. You have to think like the devil to understand the book... but it opened up a new perspective for me when I read it.

I first read Lewis's book in the year when everybody was making a big deal about guardian angels. So the message of the Screwtape Letters was an interesting contrast to what everyone else was talking about. If we could have a good figure like a guardian angel watching out for us why wouldn't it be possible that each of us had a bad influence, a personal fallen angel around us too? There is that thought in Greek mythology that we have a good spirit who sits on one shoulder and a bad spirit sitting on the other shoulder.

From the very first book of the Bible right up through books and movies from our day, Satan's reputation has grown as an enemy to God and God's people. However, Satan is not the only enemy mentioned in the Bible. Almost all of the prayers in the psalms mention enemies. But, the enemies in the psalms are not demons, they are humans.

Psalm 3, the very first prayer for help begins, "I have a lot of enemies Lord." The enemies in the psalms describe us at our worst. Some of the adjectives they use are hateful, violent, evil, brutal, deceitful, attacking people. The enemies in the psalms are people who make false accusations against innocent others, neighbors trying to take advantage of people's troubles for their own profit. The psalms were the newspapers and the reality shows of their day. It is not easy to find anything good about humanity in them. I guess we haven't changed much. We are capable of doing some pretty awful things to one another. We are enemies to one another.

Many of the other enemies mentioned in the psalms are enemies of war, wicked nations, kings of the earth who oppose God and God's people and go for victory at any cost to the people around them. Some of the prayers of the psalms are vicious, asking for God's wrath and fierce anger to overtake enemies, to blind them, ruin their homes, kill their wives and children, even asking in one psalm for their babies to be dashed against the rocks.

I've always had trouble relating to these violent images in the psalms. Violence of that magnitude creeps onto our radar screen only once in awhile, like 9/11 or the shootings this week in Bridgeville. Most of us here are so lucky, we have been spared the experience of combat. But the older I get, the more experiences life brings to me, the more I am able to relate to the images of the enemies in the psalms and a battlefield of a different kind, the battlefield of life.

A few Sundays ago when Jim, Mandi and I first came in and sat down in the sanctuary, I was looking out at all of you in the pews. One of the sacred privileges we have as pastors is that we often know a lot about what is happening in people's lives. As I looked out that morning, I thought to myself that if all of us had some visible sign of what we were dealing with that day, like a band aid to mark a battle with cancer, a pair of crutches for a relationship that's falling apart, a patch over one eye for loneliness or grief, a cast for a financial mess..... we would be one sorry looking bunch! It would look like a MASH unit in here! And if we looked around we would know that we were not alone...that life has brought us all some pretty hard stuff along the way. We all have our demons to contend with.

All of the enemies we've mentioned so far are enemies that threaten us from the outside; a serpent who gets us to bite an apple, a devil who makes us buy a dress we can't afford, demons who sit on our shoulders, nations who want more power, diseases, spouses, parents, angry men carrying guns seeking

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revenge. We tend to think of enemies as somewhere on the outside shooting at us from somewhere out there.

The Israelites from our scripture passage who gave up on Moses ever coming down from the mountain and had Aaron make the golden calf thought their biggest threat came from the outside too. They were afraid of being stranded in the wilderness with no-one to lead them to the Promised Land. I am sure none of them knew where they were going or how to get there. They looked at their supply of food and water and realized it would not last forever out there and they were also wide open to attack by other nations. They were afraid of what was going on around them when the biggest attack to their well-being was happening inside them.

God searches our hearts. God directs us from looking out to looking within. The passage we read from Jeremiah this morning says, "The heart is devious above all else, it is perverse, who can understand it? Jesus says that evil is within us, it is from the human heart. Paul reminds us that we are sinful by our very nature, there is no-one who is righteous. In so many ways, we are our own worst enemies.

Our minds are affected by the evil within us. We do not use our reasoning powers to try to discern God's will in our lives. Instead we use our minds to justify our actions and to convince ourselves that living according to our own desires instead of God's is not so bad. We are always looking for that grey area that justifies our sins. Jim talked last week about the hungers that drive our behavior, the hunger for sex, power and success, all temptations from within us that are hard to tame.

The Israelites really did have many enemies to fear that day in the world around them, but the most serious attack, the biggest threat to their lives was happening on the inside... in hearts that turned from trusting God.

Despite all that God had just done for them when he led them out of slavery in Egypt, they no longer trusted that God would provide for them, they no longer trusted God's promises for their future. They lost their identity as God's chosen people. They lost their belief in God's love for them.

Things were not moving fast enough for the Israelite's under God's plan. They ran out of patience and the fear of what might happen to them alone in the wilderness took over.

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When we are in a difficult place in our lives, facing an enemy, whether it be a disease, divorce, grief or another challenge that looks to big for us to take down on our own, we get tired of waiting for God to act. We get tired of waiting for God's timing as we call it. Our minds start convincing us God's help just is not coming, our prayers have not been heard and we are on our own. So, we start looking for a plan other than God's to follow, we lose our faith and look to logic. We start building a golden calf.

Who's the enemy? Who is the one we need to fear the most? It is the voice inside that wants to convince us we have been abandoned by God. It is the voice that tempts us to believe even though God has brought us through a lot in the past, he just might not get us through this time. This time might be that one exception when God doesn't show up.

When we lose trust in God's love for us the prophet Jeremiah tells us we can end up in a desert of despair so dry that we will not even see relief when it comes. We will not recognize the people or situations that God is using to help us, the ways he is reaching out to us. The Israelites were probably praying for Moses to come down the mountain. That was how they saw the plan for them unfolding. That was the next logical piece in their minds. But God was up on that mountain talking with Moses on their behalf, things *were* moving ahead, they just could not see it. They could not see how God was with them still, saving them, still providing everything they needed.

God is always at work in and around and through us. This is hard for us to discern with our five senses. So we have to trust in his love. God's love for us is unfailing. God's plan for us is an eternal one. God will never desert us no matter what enemies come our way. Whatever lies ahead for you and me, whatever it is we are facing today, God will be with us and will bring us through.

Listen, in closing, to the words of the one hundred twenty-first psalm.

¹I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?

²My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.

³He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.

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⁴He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

⁵The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.

⁶The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.

⁷The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.

⁸The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and for evermore.

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God. Amen.