

5th Sunday of Easter, April 24, 2005, Liturgical Year “A”

ST. BARTHOLOMEW’S ANGLICAN CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

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“Know Your Enemy: The Real Axis of Evil” (part 1)

TWO DATES THAT WILL LIVE IN INFAMY

December 7, 1941 and September 11, 2001. We all know what these dates represent. And anyone who was alive on those dates can tell you exactly what they were doing and where they were on those days.

On December 7, 1941 our nation was attacked at Pearl Harbor. The US and the rest of the free world found itself in a struggle of life and death in a war with primarily three nations – Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and Fascist Italy. These three called themselves the “Axis Powers.” As a result of these three nations coming together to make war, over 60 million lives were lost.

Fast forward almost 60 years later to September 11, 2001. We witnessed another attack: the World Trade Center Towers destroyed and the Pentagon badly damaged and over 2000 killed. It propelled us into another war, a war against terrorism. President George Bush stated in his State of the Union Address in January of 2002 that the US would not only fight against the terrorists, but would oppose those nations he called the “axis of evil” – Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. President Bush took a lot of flak for making such a statement but he was right in painting the struggle that we are in as one against good and evil. And he identified evil as an enemy. Not the people, but the systems of government which had become agents of oppression not only upon their own people but a threat to their neighbors and to the United States.

WHO OR WHAT IS THE REAL ENEMY?

But you know it is one thing to talk about world governments as being an axis of evil. The truth is there is a more serious, a more sinister, more deadly axis of evil that every human being faces. This axis of evil consists of three enemies: enemies that make no distinction between men, women or children, enemies that we face every single day.

Now last fall we talked about things like fear, anger, bitterness, stress, depression, and doubt. These can be problems in our lives, but they are nothing compared to what we will be talking about in the coming weeks. Indeed often such problems are a direct result of the real axis of evil.

Now I have entitled this series: *Know Your Enemy: the Real Axis of Evil* for a reason. If you are going to overcome such deadly enemies, then you need to know with whom or what you are dealing. And God has given us all we need to know about these three enemies in His Holy Word.

THE REAL AXIS OF EVIL: THREE UNIVERSAL ENEMIES

What are the three universal enemies that I am talking about?

ENEMY # 1: SATAN/ the DEVIL. Yes, there is a real evil personal being out there who has many malevolent beings working for him. This isn’t just the stuff of fiction or Hollywood movies. We

will see in a few minutes why Satan is real. But let me just share two verses of Scripture that should give us pause.

I Peter 5:8: *“Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”*

In Mt. 13:24-30, Jesus spoke of the parable of the sower who goes out to sow seed in a field and then an enemy comes and sows tares or weeds. Later Jesus explains the meaning of the parable and identifies the sower, the wheat, the tares and the enemy. He says in Mt. 13:37-38: *“He that sows the good seed is the Son of man, the field is the world, the good seed are the children of the kingdom, the tares are the children of the wicked one, the enemy that sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels.”*

ENEMY #2: the FLESH – Our sinful human nature that finds its fullest expression in our individual lives but which also sees its corporate expression in the world systems of government, business, education and entertainment. In all four of these main spheres of life, we see not only the work of Satan but also the work of the flesh.

Galatians 5:16-17: *“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another...”*

I Jn. 2:15-16: *“Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.”*

ENEMY #3: DEATH – Death itself is not our friend, it is an enemy. In fact, the Bible says in *“The last enemy to be destroyed is death.”* (1 Cor. 15:26). We were not created to die. The death of another human being, especially if it is a loved one, is a terrible thing to see and to experience. And couple that with the fact that most people out there are afraid to die, you can see why in and of itself, there is absolutely nothing good about death.

But the good news, and we need to always remember this, is that God has given us everything that we need to deal with these enemies and He has given us everything we need to overcome them. **Rev. 21:7:** *“He that overcomes shall inherit all things; and I will be His God and he shall be my son.”*

And yet overcoming these enemies will not be an easy task. It will not happen overnight, and you will need to know what you are dealing with. And it’s going to take work, effort, time, patience, and endurance.

IS SATAN REAL?

Now this morning I want to begin by talking about enemy #1 – Satan. We will be spending the next month on Satan – looking at who he is and where he came from, what’s he about (his message), what he wants to accomplish (his mission) and how he goes about doing his work (his methods). And along with this, what does God say about each of these as well as what the Lord has given us to overcome Satan. But first, we need to ask the question, “Is Satan real?” Many in our world don’t believe that he exists. In fact, many in the church don’t believe that He exists.

The Barna Research Group has conducted numerous polls on a variety of religious and church related topics. In polls conducted last year, they found 60% of American adults believe that Satan is not a living being but only a symbol of evil. And yet, a recent Newsweek poll found that 70% of Americans do believe in Satan. The Barna Group acknowledges this discrepancy by pointing out the seeming contradiction in another of their polls in which a slight majority (54%) also believed that *"a human being can be under the control or the influence of spiritual forces such as demons."*

Bottom line – there’s much misunderstanding and ignorance concerning the reality of a personal devil. Part of this is due to popular culture. The devil is so often portrayed as a two-horned, red skinned, forktailed creature, with a pitchfork in hand waiting for someone to bend over, that many people don’t take him seriously. They make Satan’s existence a joke. TV Comedian Flip Wilson made millions by saying as part of his stand-up routine, “the devil made me do it.”

But the other reason for so much ignorance is the fault of the Church. The fact is many clergy – bishops and priests, pastors and deacons - do not believe in the existence of a personal devil. I am reminded of what the Episcopal Bishop of the Diocese of Lexington, Kentucky said recently when asked if he believed in Satan. Bishop Stacy Sauls said “not metaphorically speaking, no.”

And then many of those who do, do not like to talk about it for fear of giving too much attention to the devil or for fear of upsetting people. Well, only a fool would not want to know about enemy whose specific desire and purpose is your defeat, not just your defeat, but who wants us to follow him. And the truth is ignorance produces more ignorance.

So what does the Bible say? What does the Word of God teach? If we take the Bible seriously can we really believe that Satan is only a symbol a mythic creature?

GOD’S WORD IS CLEAR

God’s Word is very clear on the matter. Satan is found in seven Old Testament books: Genesis, 2 Chronicles, Job, Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah. He is mentioned in 19 of the 27 New Testament books, and identified by every writer of the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Peter, James, Jude, and the writer of Hebrews. On top of this, Jesus specifically mentions Satan 15 times in the Gospels.

Recall Jesus being tempted by Satan in the wilderness or the words of Jesus, when he said he saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven in **Lk. 10:17-19** or Jesus words to Peter during the last supper **“Simon, Simon, Satan desires to have you that he may sift you like wheat.” (Lk. 22:31).**

The fact is to deny Satan’s existence is to deny both the testimony of Holy Scripture and of Jesus Christ, Himself. Satan is not just a symbol or metaphor for evil, he is real and means us harm. And let’s face it, what would be the greatest way for Satan to be able to do his work – by convincing people he doesn’t exist. This disciple of doubt seems to thrive best when he is underestimated, ignored or denied.

Now let me add that sometimes people take the other extreme and believe that the devil is lurking behind every corner and everything bad is caused by the demonic. People can become so preoccupied with the devil and his ways that they will end up giving the devil more than his due. God calls us to a balance – we shouldn’t be overly preoccupied but rather need to have a healthy respect and knowledge of whom we are dealing with.

As we heard the Apostle Peter say, “***Be sober, be on the alert, your adversary, the devil prowls around like a lion seeking someone to devour.***” Now if you were going into a jungle and were told a lion lived in that jungle, you would want to know as much as you could about that lion – when is he awake, where does he sleep, his patterns of movement, what he likes and dislikes. And you probably wouldn’t feel totally comfortable until you also had a weapon – preferably a gun. How much more so with a supernatural power evil being that means you harm? Of course, natural weapons, human wisdom, and knowledge won’t defeat this foe. There’s only one way to defeat Satan, and that is turning to God.

Next week we will continue our discussion on this powerful enemy looking at Satan’s origin, his personal characteristics and his destiny. I know some are already asking the questions, “If God is so good, why did He create Satan?” and “if God is so powerful, why doesn’t He just destroy him?” Let me just say, God did not create Satan (we will see why next week) and He will eventually destroy Satan.

Until then may we remain sober, alert, and vigilant. Not being ignorant of Satan’s devices but seeking to know exactly how he operates and why we need the Lord’s protection and strength and guidance every single day. In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. AMEN!