

Cast Your Cares

It's a fairly obscure passage in a little used book and I honestly can't tell you that I'd thought much about it if I'd thought about it at all or even heard it until I moved to Seattle for the first time in January of 2000. But while I was here, working for Taproot Theatre Company, for nearly six months while the rest of my family was 2400 miles away, I got into the habit of going on Sunday nights to the Compline service held at St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral on Capitol Hill. I don't go as much as I used to, probably only a handful of times in the years I've been your pastor, but during those lonely times it was an important part of my spiritual sustenance, a good reminder to me that I could indeed cast all my cares on God because I am God's beloved child.

Some of you have gone with me to that 9:30 p.m. service. Or you may have listened to the live broadcast on KING-FM. If so, you know that it is a nearly completely sung or chanted service with most of the music written by the great Episcopal church musician Peter Hallock, a native of our area, who passed away aged 89 just weeks ago. Mr. Hallock is nearly single-handedly responsible for the renaissance of the sung Compline service, an ancient monastic tradition which he introduced to this area with the formation of the Compline Choir in 1956. Based in plainsong chant, his liturgy has become the preferred form all across the U.S. and even in England. It is based on liturgies of centuries ago and on that great source of worship material in the English language, the Anglican Book of Common Prayer.

At the beginning of the Book of Common Prayer service for compline is the following spoken litany: "The Lord Almighty grant us a quiet night and a perfect end. Amen. Brethren, be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: whom resist, stedfast in the faith." I trust that you will recognize in that Elizabethan English an excerpt from the I Peter passage I just read. It is at the heart of what I'd like us to consider this morning: What do we, secure and educated Americans of the 21st Century, make of this reference to "the devil?" What meaning can that have for us? How do we or how don't we resist evil? Is there suffering in our lives, as there was in the lives of the early Christians? And what lies at the end of our path? What does it really mean to cast all our anxiety on God?

Let's begin with that roaring lion, our adversary, the devil. Our modern culture has done its best to render the concept of the devil harmless in part by making such a creature the object of fun. Just think of the cute little red-skinned, horned and tailed fellow with the pitchfork in cartoons. Or Flip Wilson's outrageous Geraldine Jones claiming, "The devil made me buy this dress." And in many ways, that's a good thing, because as Sir Thomas More taught, and C.S. Lewis reminded us, "the devil, that proud spirit, cannot endure to be mocked." But the mocking only works to defeat the devil if we begin with the presupposition that the devil is something or someone who might be taken seriously to begin with. And while I'm certainly not advocating a kind of belief in the fearsome monster of horror movies, I think we are well advised to consider what ancient Hebrews and Christians were concerned with when mentions of the devil pop up in Scripture.

The late New Testament scholar and theologian Walter Wink gives me the best handle with which to grasp the reality of the devil as we can understand that concept today. I've mentioned Wink's work several times over the years: how he sees the struggle of the people of God, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against

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the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” Wink recognized, as do many of our “spiritual but not religious” friends, the existence of extrapersonal evil in our world. When economic systems and governmental agencies, designed to produce the greatest good for the greatest number, run amok and grind “the least of these” under their wheels and the bureaucrats and technocrats and MBAs who are supposed to keep the machine humming throw up their hands and say, “What can we do? It’s just the way things are,” then, my sisters and my brothers, institutional evil has gone far to winning the day. We are engaged in a struggle against the Powers That Be.

In his book by that title, The Powers That Be, Wink wrote that we have personified the world-encompassing spirit of that systemic evil in Satan, the character that appears in the ancient Hebrew text of Job, the “accuser.” In the Greek of the later Old Testament and the New Testament, the Hebrew word “Satan” becomes “diabolos,” devil. And we further establish the personhood of Satan, Wink writes, when we use the story of Lucifer’s rebellion and expulsion from heaven to symbolically depict “the fate of any creature that lusts after ultimate power and authority.”

That lust for power and authority is a spirit that we can recognize as the roaring lion that prowls around, looking for someone to devour. In our fiercely independent American culture, we bristle whenever someone tells us that we’re not the boss of ourselves, that we’re not, as the popular poem, often heard this time of year at graduations, tells us, masters of our own fate and captains of our own souls. Those of us who gather to worship God on Sunday morning recognize, I hope, that role belongs to God in Christ. But rebellion of the Satanic type seems built in to our dominant culture, what Walter Wink would call “the domination system.”

And so, as Peter writes, we must resist. We must resist letting our dominant culture eat us up, devouring us and making us just another part of itself, just another cog in the machinery that grinds along. How do we do that? Well, first of all, we humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God. We set our selfish desires aside and seek God’s will for our lives. When I was a preteen, I first saw the sports tearjerker about the friendship between Gale Sayers and Brian Piccolo of the Chicago Bears called “Brian’s Song.” It prompted me to read Sayers’ memoir of that time which drew heavily on his Christian faith. Does anybody remember the title of that book? It was called I Am Third, referencing Sayers’ motto: God is first, my family is second, and I am third. When we truly go through life with this attitude, we go a long way toward resisting the domination system that tells us to look out for number one, meaning ourselves, and to grab for everything we can get.

The second step is resisting the devil, if we can use that shorthand, is to discipline ourselves. The old Elizabethan English, “Be sober,” is actually a better translation of the Greek but in our day of AA and other recovery groups that word has come to have a narrower meaning than it did in the days of Thomas Cranmer and the other writers of the Book of Common Prayer. The best modern equivalent might be “Stay focused.” In the attempt to put God’s will first in our lives, to follow the teachings of Jesus to “seek first the kingdom of God,” it can be easy to be distracted by the relentless pressure of our society to turn away to other things – wealth, comfort, prestige, the list goes on and on. To escape the jaws of the lion, we must stay focused.

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Peter's next admonition, "keep alert" or "be vigilant" sounds very similar. The word used here would have special resonance, though, in the story of Peter, the purported author of this epistle. The literal Greek meaning is "keep awake." It's the same Greek verb used in Jesus' teaching about the need to be ready for the Day of the Lord. And, more hauntingly, the same verb used in the narrative of Jesus in Gethsemane: "And he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake." And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want." He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."'" If this little book was indeed written by the old fisherman, his friends would have known his deep regrets over failing to "keep awake." It would have been a heartfelt warning to them, and to us, not to fail in our calling from Jesus.

Peter also reminds us that there is a cost to be paid for resisting the lion of dominant culture. In his day, that was the dominating Empire of Rome and the cost was suffering: exile, persecution, punishment, and even death. The Baptist scholar, Dr. Miguel de la Torre, who spoke at Seattle First Baptist last week and whom some of us have heard in the "Soup, Salad & Soul" video curriculum on emigration, reminds us that it wasn't their simple faith in a different God that got the early Christians into so much trouble. "The early churches were persecuted not for what they believed," de la Torre writes, "but for what they did. They preached a message of liberation. To preach good news to the poor, freedom to the imprisoned, sight for those blinded, and liberation to the oppressed is to reject conformity with the prevailing power structures." In other words, the Church of Jesus Christ was being subversive. And in places where Christians are being persecuted today, it is the same. Christians are not persecuted because they simply believe. They are persecuted because of what they do. And what they do is to tell others living under the same domination system that they need not be captive, they need not be afraid, that they, too, can resist the roaring lion.

Now, the question we have to ask ourselves is, if we aren't experiencing suffering from subverting the dominant culture, why not? Can it really be that there is nothing for us to push against? Is God's protection covering us as we push or are we just not pushing hard enough to bother the lion? Valerie Nicolet-Anderson, a Parisian scholar, writes, "Should Christians today be wary of the fact that, in many places, the Christian church no longer provokes hostility? In fact, in many places in Europe, polite indifference is the most common expression towards the Church; the way most people relate to the church." We could probably say the same here. Have we forgotten, as Peter said, that the God of all grace has called us to resist the lion, steadfast in the faith?

If our calling is not enough, Peter provides us with some reassurance as to the ultimate result of our resistance to the domination system. We may suffer a little while, he says. We should remember that any suffering we do here and now will be very much less than those early Christians who were literally thrown to the lions or those in other countries now who are physically tortured and killed. But suffering, says Peter, will be followed by God's actions to restore, support, strengthen and establish us. If you'll forgive a little more Greek, there's some good stuff here. That word restore is the same as used in the Gospel story about Peter and his

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fellow fishermen mending their nets. If you have suffered for the sake of telling the Good News of Jesus, think of God as bending over you, cradling you in strong hands, and carefully weaving your life back together. The Greek translated as “support” means to make something permanent. Strengthen is pretty self-evident but establish means to lay the foundation of a house, or to secure something by fixing it firmly in place. If God sets you on your foundation, you will not be shaken by hard times. Foy Valentine, the longtime executive director of the Christian Life Commission in the old “big tent” Southern Baptist Convention, used to preach at my home church in St. Louis a couple of times a year. On this passage, he says, “The cross is for a little while, but the crown is forever. Persecution may destroy us, but God will “restore” us. Suffering may shake us, but God will “establish” us. Troubles may shatter us, but God will “strengthen” us. Triumphantly, God’s persevering people shout together, “To him be the dominion for ever and ever.”

And how can Foy Valentine and Peter and the others be so certain that God will restore us, establish us, and strengthen us after suffering. Remember what we sang with the children earlier? “Jesus loves me, this I know.” It’s the central message of the Good News. Peter says it like this: “Cast all your anxiety on God because God cares for you.” It’s something he learned from Jesus. “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Keep the faith, put the things of God first, resist systemic evil, and all shall be well.

If Jesus’ teaching did not cement the message for us, perhaps his actions will. Satan, remember, was waiting for him as well. The domination system had him in its sights. But on the very eve of the crisis, on the night he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and broke it and gave it to them. My friend Rev. Steven Greenebaum, who will be our speaker in Sunday School in two weeks, reminded me recently that the bread at Passover is sometimes called “the bread of affliction” or “the bread of poverty.” It is humble bread, the bread of the people. In claiming it as his body, Jesus may have been saying to the disciples, “Take humility into yourself and make it a part of you. Humble yourselves.” And then he took the wine, the great symbol of rejoicing, and called it his blood. Why? Maybe because he was so confident in God’s love that joy flowed through him even when he knew he was likely facing death. All his anxieties were cast on God.

And so, my sisters and my brothers, be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: whom resist, stedfast in the faith. Let us humble ourselves because in due time God will exalt us. We may cast our anxieties on God

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because God loves us so, just as Jesus did and does and will until the end of all things. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.