

Spiritual Warfare: The Shiny Thread

Ephesians 6:12; 2 Corinthians 11:14; various other texts

I can't remember the last time a sermon series created the kind of buzz I've been hearing. It's caught me by surprise. And frankly, it is a little daunting because I feel like there is a lot at stake here...and I do not feel like an expert in the subject of spiritual warfare. But I do feel led to preach on it. So I will do my best but this is deep stuff and you are going to have to lean in and help me, okay? And we will ask the Holy Spirit to do his will.

Last week we listened to a uniquely Christian teaching of Jesus: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. I urged you to pray this week for the person who hates you and wants to do you harm. This was a tough challenge for many of you. Some of you have been so hurt, so wounded, that honestly, you want to fight back; you want to lash out at the one who has caused you pain... not love them...not pray for them.

The Apostle Paul would have understood those feelings. His enemies brutalized him. This man was stoned, beaten, flogged, caned, shipwrecked, snake bit. He had every reason to fight back. But God gave Paul a powerful and revolutionary vision...one that we are going to explore for the next six weeks. I'd ask you to stand as we recite this passage together:

"...We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:12)

How many of you saw *The Hunger Games*? It's a story of post-apocalyptic America in which a ruthless dictator name President Snow entertains the people by forcing their children to fight each other to the death like gladiators. The heroine is Katniss Everdeen. PIC At one point, her friend, Haymitch, gives her this advice: "Remember who the real enemy is." Katniss is transformed. She realizes that it is not the other gladiators whom she must fight; it is President Snow, the man behind it all, who is the real enemy.

Paul tells us in this text that we are engaged in a great spiritual battle. There are forces that want to discourage us, tear down our marriages, steal our children and health and wealth. They want to wreak havoc in the world through terror and hatred and racism and division. When we see these things happening in our lives, in the lives of our friends or on the news, we naturally turn our anger towards the human beings who are hurting or harming us. But Paul says, "Remember who the real enemy is." The arch-enemy who hates all that is good and right, who hates God and all who follow him and who wants to do everything he can to

disrupt, destroy, discourage and depress the people of God...who is this enemy of everything good? Satan.

This is the one enemy for whom we are not called to pray. The Bible calls us to resist him, to fight him, to stand against his schemes, to be watchful for him, but we do not have to pray for this enemy. And Satan is not alone, by the way. He has spiritual flunkies who do his bidding; whose purpose it is to attack and discourage and distract us. The Bible calls them "unclean spirits" or "demons."

We citizens of the Western world...tend to believe that reality is only what we perceive through our five senses. This is reality...the material world. If you can't see, hear, smell, taste or touch it, it isn't real. In our dependence upon education and intellect, we are quick to dismiss anything we cannot explain logically or scientifically.

But the Bible teaches that there are two realms of reality. The physical world...what we experience every day. But also, the spiritual world. Paul uses the phrase "heavenly places" five times in his writings. By that he does not mean that which is up there versus down here. For Paul...there is another entire realm of reality on this earth. We can't see it...but as we develop our spiritual senses...we begin to notice it. To discern it.

Think about it this way. If you were to walk out into the desert at night, it would be pitch black. But if you turned on an ultraviolet light, this is what you might see. Scorpions. How scary would that be? Something about UV light reveals things that might otherwise be invisible to you. Jesus, Paul and the other apostles teach that we live in an overlap between physical and spiritual worlds. There are spiritual forces and powers at work right here in our world. If we had a certain kind of light, we could turn it on and would suddenly be aware of a whole different world; a spiritual realm; every bit as real as the physical world.

And by the way, it isn't all dark and scary. The Bible teaches that there are good spirits...they are called angels... at work in this world. Protecting, ministering to, defending God's people. And of course, the greatest invisible power of the spiritual realm lives within us. Who? The Holy Spirit. See...you already have some idea about the spiritual realm if you believe that the invisible, non-material Spirit of Jesus lives inside of you, gives you gifts and power and comfort and peace.

Statistically, the vast majority of Americans believe in a God they cannot see. And one study suggests that up to 97% of evangelical Christians believe in angels. But a majority of American Christians does not believe in the existence of a literal Devil. Apparently, we want to believe in the good we cannot see but we'd rather deny the existence of the evil we cannot see.

Some religious traditions talk so much about the devil and evil spirits that you wonder who they think is more powerful. Others...like Presbyterians... probably talk too little about it. But in a world and time when the forces of evil are increasingly brazen and brutal...and in a season when we are talking about the power of prayer...I felt convicted that we needed to tackle this topic of spiritual warfare. It might seem odd that we would do so during Lent, the season leading up to Easter. But I John 3:8 tells us that Jesus came to "destroy the works

of the devil.” He accomplished that victory, ultimately, through his death and resurrection. So Lent is a perfect time to talk about spiritual warfare.

I want to start this series by laying Biblical groundwork. First of all, the devil is a created being. Satan is not God’s eternal evil counterpart. Yahweh alone is eternal; he is the creator of all things through Jesus who is Lord of all. Colossian 1:15 says this about Jesus:

... by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.

So Satan is not an eternal evil counterpoint to the holy God. He is a creation of God. Many scholars believe he was a beautiful angel whom Isaiah refers to as “the Morning Star,” translated “Lucifer.” One view is that Lucifer became proud and led a rebellion of angels against God and they were cast out of heaven. Frankly, biblical references to this are few and cryptic. We really don’t know much about the origins of Satan and why he is in rebellion against God. But a journey through the Bible reveals the depth of that rebellion.

The name by which the Devil is known in the Old Testament is Satan. (When I was typing this, it kept auto correcting to say “Stan.” Somehow a malevolent spiritual archenemy named “Stan” doesn’t seem very threatening.) “Satan” is a Hebrew word for “Adversary” or “Accuser.” Satan doesn’t appear very often in the Old Testament...but he is there. We first find him in the Garden of Eden although he isn’t called Satan there. What is he called? The Serpent. But in Revelation, John tells us that the Serpent was really Satan in disguise.

Satan also appears in the Book of Job. He asks permission of God to tempt Job and steal his faith. (He’s unsuccessful, by the way.) And in Zechariah, the prophet has a vision of Satan falsely accusing the high priest of Israel. (Remember, Satan means “Accuser!”). There are also some possible allusions to Satan in Isaiah and Ezekiel.

But it is when we come to the New Testament that Satan’s nasty works are seen in stark relief. The New Testament gives him a new name: Diabolos. The Devil. Which means “Slanderer” or “Splitter.” (I’ve always found the “splitter” to be particularly powerful image. He wants to split lives, split relationships, drive a wedge between us and God...he’s the Splitter!)

“Devil” is mentioned 35 times in the gospels alone. He is also known by other names. Beelzebub (which means “Lord of Dung” or Lord of the Flies”); “the Prince of Demons,” the Evil One, the Tempter and the Thief. Jesus calls him a “Murderer,” “the Father of lies” and “the Ruler of this World.” John calls him “The Destroyer”; Peter calls him “your Adversary” who “prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour.” And finally, the Apostle Paul, describes him as one who disguises himself as an “Angel of Light.” In other words, *Diabolos* does not always present himself as hideous and frightening; more often he comes *in cognito* as something or someone that seems beautiful, reasonable, enticing, seductive.

An Angel of Light. That's why I called this first sermon, "Finding the Shiny Thread." Remember last year when we watched for the "Scarlet Thread?" The glimpses of Jesus throughout the Bible, from the first chapter to the last? Well, as you have seen, there is also a "Shiny Thread" that weaves its way from Genesis 3 all the way to Revelation 20. Satan. The Accuser. The Adversary. The Evil One. The Lord of the Flies.

Now why am I teaching this? To frighten you? No! To enlighten you. First of all, I want you to believe The Devil is real. If our congregation is anything like Christendom across America, then a good percentage of you don't believe in a real devil. Or you prefer to ignore him. Both approaches are perilous. If the Bible teaches that Satan is real if Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul and Peter teach that Satan is real...if the Lord Jesus who devoted a third of his miraculous ministry to casting out evil spirits...believed in and did battle with Satan...if the entire witness of scripture, from beginning to end, teaches that we have a spiritual enemy named Satan who hates God, hates good and wants to thwart, confound and frustrate our discipleship...are we really so arrogant and foolish as to say otherwise?

As I said, most Americans prefer not to believe that there is a real devil. And he loves that, by the way! Satan does his best work when people think he's a fairy tale. (But believe me; two-thirds of this world take this spiritual battle very seriously. I will share more in the coming weeks of how the power of Jesus to deliver people from spiritual oppression is one of the strongest evangelistic forces!)

Satan is Real. But Satan is also defeated! I will teach more on this next week, but the most compelling aspect of Jesus' ministry was his confrontation and defeat of Satan and his evil forces. The Old Testament has accounts of healings and miracles and even accounts of people being raised from the dead. But never in the Old Testament do we find a prophet doing what Jesus did. With a word, he would command demons to leave their victim...and they were forced to obey. Jesus destroyed the works of the devil!

And Satan saw this defeat coming, by the way. He tried to tempt Jesus by offering a way that would avoid the cross. But Satan failed. And with Jesus' death on the cross...with his shed blood...and with his resurrection, Satan's goose was cooked. In Revelation 20 John gives us a glimpse of Satan's ultimate fate. After thousands of years of creating spiritual mayhem and murder, the devil is "thrown down into the lake of fire where...[he] will be tormented day and night forever and ever."

Satan is real. Satan is defeated. But Satan is also defiant. He is trying to wreak as much havoc as he can before his time is up! How many remember the Kuwait War in 1990? Saddam Hussein's forces invaded Kuwait and occupied. A great coalition, led by General Norman Schwarzkopf, drove the Iraqis out. In fact, they crushed them. Their defeat was utter and humiliating. But on their way out of the country, do you remember what they did? They blew up 732 Kuwaiti oil wells. Those wells burned for months, destroying the environment. It was pure spite. They knew they had lost, but they were going to make life as miserable and bleak and ugly as they could for the victors.

That's what Satan is doing right now. Trying to cause as much trouble and mayhem as he can, while he can. And our task, as followers of the victorious Jesus, is to recognize Satan's

evil work and, in the power of the Holy Spirit, battle him. I will talk more about that in the weeks to come but this week, I would challenge us to do two things.

First, begin to train your spiritual eyes. Begin to look at the things that are going on around you with the awareness that we are in a battle, not with human beings, but with spiritual forces. Don't get paranoid. Don't get freaked out. But begin to be aware.

Sometimes we just get sick or have conflict or lose money on a deal. Not every setback in life is a demonic attack. But IF you find yourself in intense strife...If you feel like you are getting hit from all sides at the same time...If you find yourself in deep conflict with your spouse...If your kids are being drawn into destructive relationships...If you are in a crushing legal battle...If your health seems to be under assault... If you are paralyzed by a sense of shame for something you know God has forgiven already...then be aware...consider the possibility...that your enemy...the accuser...the slanderer...the Splitter... the Liar is attacking you. Is trying to convince you that you are unworthy of God's love. Is trying to break up your marriage. Is trying to steal your kids or your health or your wealth. Realize it...and fight back!

Most of us Presbyterians do not think this way. But this battle is real and if we begin to look with spiritual eyes...to sense what the Holy Spirit might be prompting in us... to develop our gifts of spiritual discernment...then we will be better able to recognize and do battle with our Adversary.

One other essential thing to remember: There is power in the name of Jesus The name of Jesus Christ has great spiritual power against which Satan cannot stand. Paul in Philippians 2 wrote this: "...at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." When you pray in the name of Jesus...when you rebuke evil in the name of Jesus...that is an irresistible, unstoppable force before which the Devil can only whimper and retreat.

In other words, do not walk out of here today frightened. Walk out of here with your chins up! Emboldened because you realize that, although we are indeed engaged in a spiritual battle, in the name of Jesus, that battle is already won. And one more thing: remember this verse because will be our theme for the series: "Greater is He that is in me than he that is in the world!" (I John 4:4)