

VICTORY OVER EVIL
a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, May 1, 2016
based on I Peter 5:6-11, Colossians 2:13-15

The sermon this morning is the fourth in a five-part sermon series entitled, “Christ versus the Powers of Evil.”

We have noted in this series that one of the basic spiritual perceptions of human beings across the ages is that there are dark forces, powers of evil, at work in the world. We experience those powers on many levels. We can see the power of evil in mass movements—from Nazi Germany to the present-day Islamic State. We experience dark forces on an individual level, where people may experience the unrelenting power of an addiction, or temptations, or anxieties. In various ways, we confront negative forces that tear at us in life. People have visualized those forces in a variety of fashions. In the Scripture passage we heard from first Peter, the power of evil is pictured as a ravenous lion, prowling around us, waiting to devour us. It is a picture of what human beings experience—we are under assault by powers of evil that threaten to undo us.

But our problem is not simply negative forces that come at us from the outside. We have noted in this series that the power of evil draws its strength from human sin. Sin is our condition of separation from God, and evil can get a grip on us precisely because of our weakness and our alienation from God.

We noted further last week that a prime way that evil gets a hold of people is through deception and lies, and those lies work by appealing to human sin. For example, terrorists fighting for the Islamic state are told that if they slaughter people in the name of Allah, they will go to heaven. It is a preposterous lie, but it works among susceptible people by appealing to their sinful desire to want to slaughter their enemies.

Or lies work by playing on the fears and the doubts that we have in our sinful condition. In our society we are regularly told the lie that there is no God. The lie can work on us when we see a lot of trouble and feel no connection with God.

So in our weakness the power of evil can get a grip on us, and because evil gains entry through our sinful human condition, we become trapped in a vicious circle—in sinfulness human beings become caught in the power of evil, and evil feeds and grows stronger from human sin.

From all this it is quite clear that human beings will never answer the problem of evil on their own. We need a Savior. We need a redemptive power of goodness that can rescue us from our sin and break the power of evil.

That saving power comes in Jesus Christ. Christ answers our human problem on the cross, in a fashion well described by the apostle Paul in that passage we heard from Colossians. “You were dead in your sin,” Paul says, “but God made you alive together with Christ when God forgave your sin, nailing in to the cross.” Christ answers our root problem of sin by reconciling us to God; and as we are set right with God, Christ frees us

from the power of evil. As Paul said, “Christ disarmed the principalities and powers”—the Biblical phrase that denotes the powers of evil in the world—triumphing over them through the cross.” As we are put right with God, evil loses its power over us; we are enabled instead to live in the grace and power and love of God.

The victory of Christ over the powers of evil comes to its supreme expression in the resurrection. On the cross, Jesus takes upon himself the full intensity of the world’s hatred and wickedness, and he takes finally death upon himself. But in the resurrection, Christ breaks through it all, opening the way for each of us into the eternal blessing of God. So the victory over evil is won. As Paul would say, “Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (I Corinthians 15:57)

But that victory needs now to be received into our own lives. We remain free to choose whether to have faith or not, and we remain subject to evils that are raging in the world around us. This is why the apostle Peter, in the passage we heard, appeals to us saying, “Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, so that He may exalt you in due time.” We are called to put our trust in God, so that God’s saving power can take hold in us, and God can enable us then to stand firm in faith against all the evils that may assail us. Peter notes that as we wrestle with evil and trouble we may experience times of real trial and suffering, but Peter encourages us to persevere in faith, saying, “After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace will Himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.” So the victory over evil, won by Christ, can take hold in our lives today.

In Handel’s Messiah, parts II and III, the words of Scripture are sung to declare the magnificence of what God through Christ has done on the cross and in the resurrection. As we hear these words and music, may we hear the message about the victory that Christ brings to us. We continue to struggle against forces of darkness, and it is clear that we will never win the victory on our own. But we can be lifted by a saving power beyond ourselves, as we put our faith in Christ, for as Peter said, “To Him belongs the power forever and ever.” (I Peter 5:11)

The sermon was followed by the Sanctuary Choir, accompanied by a small orchestra, singing excerpts from Handel’s Messiah, the crucifixion and resurrection sections.