

Psalm 22:1-5, 9-11, 23-24 ~ John 1:1-5, 14, 16-18  
 Preaching on Your Good Questions: (2<sup>nd</sup> of 3 Sermon Series)  
*What about Evil? Why does the Wrong seem "oft so Strong"?*  
 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
 The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

*Sermon:*

Can you remember the character in a movie, or a book that frightened the living daylight out of you as a child? For me, it was "The Wicked Witch of the West" in the Wizard of Oz. She and her flying monkeys scared me so much, the first year I was brave enough to sit there and watch the whole movie without running behind the couch during the scary parts was truly a rite of passage. (All of you under thirty may not believe that we only got to see movies like The Wizard of Oz on TV once or twice a year!) In my teen years, scary Darth Vader in Star Wars took her place. With that voice and that breathing.

Our children got started early with the story, *The Monster at the end of this Book*. Anybody remember that one? Sesame Street's Lovable, Furry Old Grover gives us a great solution to the problem of evil, "Listen, I have an idea. If you do not turn any pages, we will never get to the end of this book. And that is good, because there is a Monster at the end of this book. So please do not turn the page... YOU TURNED THE PAGE!" Our daughters came of age when everyone was reading the Harry Potter books and being scared by Harry's evil nemesis, Lord Voldemort. For you Gen Z folks: maybe it was Thanos, the "baddest" villain from the Marvel Universe's Guardians of the Galaxy. Thanos is perhaps the most evil, bloodthirsty, and powerful villain in the universe. Not only do his enemies include nearly every Superhero in existence. He actually wiped out half the population of the world. Maybe Thanos just had better technology...

In any case, against the advice of Grover, we *do* keep turning page after page even with the warning again and again that there is a monster at the end of the book. Or under our bed. Just around the corner. If we are being honest: scary monsters and horrendous danger lurk not only in stories or video games. We know evil is real. And we all have to deal with it. Around us and within us. Just two days ago, on Friday afternoon, a passenger plane crashed in Brazil, killing the 62 people on board. Twelve days ago, Hurricane Debby formed in the Antilles and then brought wind and rain to the US causing 9 fatalities and at least 2 billion dollars in damages mostly in Florida, Georgia and the Carolinas. For way too long, the wars in Gaza and Ukraine rage on, taking innocent lives, still resisting resolution or peace.

Suffering, death, damage, destruction: Evil is real. We know it when we see. And we feel it in our guts. The consequences of systemic evil carry over from one generation to the next. In our beloved nation, the evil of chattel slavery in the US, even after the Civil War ended the legal practice of slavery, Jim Crow Laws diabolically sprung into existence enforcing racist practices, along with lynchings, real estate redlining, voter suppression, and more. The evil wrought in the genocide of Indian Tribes across Turtle Island, the name for North America given by the Ojibwe and other First Nations long *before* 1776. After colonization, and part of Turtle Island became

known as the USA, came broken treaty after broken treaty, increasingly diminished Indian reservations, then Indian Boarding schools. An evil that continues to damage First Nations children and their families well into the present day.

The told and untold damages of all these evils continue to this day. Although progress toward greater equality has certainly been made since the 1960's, the Southern Poverty Law Center which has been tracking the existence of hate groups since 1990, documented the highest number of active anti LGBTQ+ and white nationalist groups ever recorded, just last year, in its 2023 report. If only we could turn the page on all these monsters.

Yes, evil is real and rampant. I was not surprised when I invited you all to tell me what questions you would like me to preach on, several of you asked about evil, or the "theodicy" question. A fancy word for the question every thoughtful Christian asks: If God created the world good, and God is all powerful and wills good, why is there so much evil and suffering in this world? "What is the purpose of evil," one of you asked. Another, "why does it succeed so often?" And also this, "If God really cares about us, as opposed to being a watchmaker God, why does God allow so much evil?"

Here's the truth: neither the Old nor the New Testament answer this question framed in a logical, rational way. Why is there evil in the world? We do not know. The origin of evil is a mystery. Our biblical story does not engage it directly. The Bible doesn't tell us *why* the serpent shows up in the Garden of Eden, or *why* the Israelites were enslaved by Pharaoh. Nor do we get a *logical* answer to the why of innocent suffering in the brilliant book of Job. Or why Jesus had to contend with Satan from day one on the job until his final from the cross. We are not granted a logical answer.

However, we are given something much better. We are invited into the deep and dangerous intimacy of communion with God in the midst of inexplicable suffering. As we heard in John 1: the Word actually became flesh. God became a human being who chose to experience the limitations and pains of being human firsthand. Our God, who in Christ, suffers with us. Jesus knows our pain firsthand. Even the pain of utter abandonment. As we heard in in the first lesson, Psalm 22. Where he is recorded to have cried out in utter physical, emotional, and spiritual agony: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The truth is our Christian faith is actually uncompromisingly realistic about the presence and power of evil. Look at the primary symbol of our faith, which in our sanctuary hangs front and center, larger than life size: the cross. The event of Jesus crucified on the cross acknowledges that evil is so strong it can seem to be not just the enemy of God, but the victor over God. It can seem like good is defeated and evil triumphs. Hatred overcomes love. That justice loses and injustice wins. God's world becomes Satan's world.

But that is *not* the end of our story of Jesus. We do not have a monster at the end of our book. We have an empty tomb. We have a Savior who God raised from the dead. Our Lord and Savior came back from the dead to show us that love wins. Not only on that day of days. But

every day, every moment that we can live into the truth of John 1:5: "The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." The book is still being written with your life and mine. Together we can help each other confess and confront evil within and all around us.

We do not believe that God sends evil or wills evil since it would be contrary to God's essential character of love and mercy (1 John 4:8,16). However, God does not override our freedom to make choices that result in evil. In the midst of the worst of evils: terrorism, war, famine, disaster, disease—the promise of the scriptures is that God is with us and that through God's continuing presence God can bring good out of evil and suffering. (Romans 8:28) Paul "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."<sup>i</sup>This does *not* mean that evil is secretly good. Or that we do evil in order for good to come out of it. It does mean that the worst evil must finally serve God's good will and God's world. As we sang in our opening song, "This is my Father's world...that though the wrong is oft so strong, God is the ruler yet."

As Christ's hands and feet, we are given the work of calling out evil when we see it in our community, nation, and world. Christ calls us to take a stand against what we know is wrong and say it. Say it often, say it to everyone. Don't pretend that everything is ok just because the decision, or legislation, or change in the policy doesn't affect you. Call it out. Jesus did. And so should we. If you think the emperor is naked, say so.<sup>ii</sup>

As a denomination, we Presbyterians took an action against evil at General Assembly against the evil of gun violence. We voted unanimously to pass "An Overture Calling for Action so that Children May Live Free from Gun Violence." 424 – 0! It calls upon every congregation in the PC(USA) to take some specific action of love and responsibility for children as part of the movement to prevent gun violence, understanding that taking any action collectively as a church is a witness of what it means to be united in Christ. Such as:

1. Actively support and pray for the emotional, spiritual and mental health needs of children as they grow up in an era of school lockdowns, active shooter drills and near-daily news of gun violence.
2. Promote Secure Gun Storage - Churches of the PC(USA) can share information about the Be SMART for Kids campaign, which provides strategies and resources to protect children from unintentional firearm injury and death... I will skip to the 7<sup>th</sup> one:
7. Vote - As citizens, parents and grandparents, prayerfully prioritize the lives of America's children in determining how to cast our individual votes in local, state and national elections.

Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, twentieth century Russian author and Soviet dissident famously wrote: "If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"<sup>iii</sup> Sin and evil are within all of us. Did you ever notice that every Sunday at the beginning of the service we confess our sins, our personal sins and our social sins, out loud and silently. This is one of the ways that we as Presbyterians seek to acknowledge this truth. It is baked into our weekly liturgy.

“Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?” Sound familiar? This is the first question we ask everyone who is professing their faith in Christ in the Presbyterian Church. Like the three teens we confirmed last Sunday. Did you hear what we ask? Not “Do you understand sin and evil in the world?” We don’t have to try to explain or understand evil to turn from it. And in the same move, in the next question we say “yes” to embracing the grace upon grace given to us in Christ’s death and resurrection. It was in the very midst of his suffering and confusion, when Job’s friend Bildad was trying to comfort him with unhelpful words and bad theology, that Job declared, “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. (Job 19:25) Job knew. Do you?”

Did you ever wonder how you might go about fulfilling the promise you made to turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?” Author and theologian Walter Winks has given us a prayer to help us. It is an altered version of the powerful Serenity Prayer written by Reinhold Niebuhr, and at the core of the AA 12 step recovery program for alcoholics and addicts: *God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.* Walter Winks’ altered version, addressing the challenge of evil goes like this: *God help me to refuse ever to accept evil; by your Spirit empower me to work for change precisely where and how you call me; and free me from thinking I have to do everything.*<sup>iv</sup>

We don’t have to do everything. May God also grant us the serenity to accept that we can’t know the answers to some questions, like why is there evil in the world. But we can let the One who proved to us that goodness is stronger than evil take our hand, and lead us through the dark, into the light. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Donald K. McKim, *Presbyterian Beliefs: A Brief Introduction*, (Geneva Press: Louisville, KY, 2003) pp. 31-32

<sup>ii</sup> The beginning of this paragraph is taken from an unpublished sermon of The Rev. Dr. Tammy Stampfli, “Resisting Evil,” preached March 12, 2017.

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/1020045-if-only-there-were-evil-people-somewhere-insidiously-committing-evil>

<sup>iv</sup> Keith Beasley-Topliffe, Book Review of Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, “Weavings,” Volume XII, Number 6, November/December 1997, pp. 46-48.