

**“The Ever Evolving “Sa-tan”
Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
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I want to begin this morning by taking all of you to a small fishing village about one hour's drive north of Tampa, Florida. The town is called Inglis, Florida. It is a town of about 1500 residents. It is one of those quaint, small fishing villages in Florida that people routinely go to in order to experience old Florida.

Inglis, Florida had a problem some years ago. The city made a proclamation. Caroline Risher, the mayor of Florida, came up with a city proclamation to banish Satan from their town. On November 5, 2001, the City Council came up with a proclamation and posted this proclamation at all 4 entrances to the town. The proclamation read this, in part: "Be it known from this day forward that Satan, ruler of darkness, giver of evil, destroyer of what is good and just, is not now, nor ever again will be, a part of this town of Inglis. Satan is hereby declared powerless, no longer ruling over, nor influencing our citizens". Well, that is one of the most ambitious city proclamations I have ever heard of.

In the wake of that proclamation, some people who were rather disturbed by that proclamation learned that in the United States, according to a Newsweek poll, a full 75% of the citizens of our nation believe in Satan. They believe that there is this personified person, if you will, who embodies evil and is to be banned from our town, or from our souls, or from our spirits, so this proclamation was in response to this perception by many, many Americans that there is Satan, or a devil, if you will, that lurks around our lives.

One of the things I want to share with all of you this morning is that the idea of Satan is relatively new to our world. We tend to take the idea of Satan and the devil as always having been here, a power that has always been present in our world, but the concept of Satan as a personified being is a relatively new concept in history.

The concept of Satan originates from our Old Testament from the Hebrew language. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for what has now become Satan, was the word "Satan", and in Hebrew, "Satan" meant "to bear a grudge against" or "to slander" or "to accuse" or "to have an adversary". In the Hebrew Bible, the word "Satan" is used six times as a verb, six other times as a noun, and in a variety of other places as this concept of the Satan involved in Scripture or in thought, so the Book in our New Testament that most clearly puts forth the idea of the Satan is, of course, the Book of Job. In the Book of Job, Satan, as we would read it, or Satan, is interestingly not an adversary of God or not in opposition to God. He is actually part of God's divine council. God puts Satan to work for him to challenge, to accuse and to tempt Job. It is a Book of wisdom, partially and perhaps mostly about how we struggle with temptation, but it is fascinating to think that in those early Books, the Satan was not really separate from God in the sense of an opposing evil force, but was part of God's team.

In other pieces of Scripture, earlier than Job, we learn that evil is originally attributed to God, so if you were to read Isaiah 45, you would read Verse 7 that says this: "I form light and create darkness. I make peace and create evil. I, Yahweh, do all these things".

In our biblical testimony, when we think of Satan as evil or demonic or all those metaphors that we use to talk about evil power, what we have there is the sort of narrative evolution of how people of faith have thought of evil powers. It has, at times, originated from God. It has, at times, been part of God's team, and as it evolves, it breaks away from God and becomes an opposing force. What scholars and historians have come to understand is this. Breaking away from God most powerfully took place while Israel was under the reign of foreign powers, Babylon and, later, Persia, and as the Israelites lived under those foreign powers, what we call the Exile Years, when Israel as a nation was destroyed, and the Temple was destroyed, as they lived under those foreign powers, one

of the things that they tried to do was to live a righteous life. They did not understand the judgment that was being rendered upon them. They did not understand why God had abandoned them and destroyed their nation and their Temple, so they were under foreign powers, and they tried their best to live lives of faithfulness, righteousness and peace because, if they would do that, they would again receive God's favor. Now, what happened in those years under foreign powers is that they did not really experience God's favor again. They experienced oppression under Babylon and Persia. They experienced foreign gods, and they began to ask the questions: Why is God not responding to our pain? Why is God abandoning us? What is going on here that slowly led to the evolution and to the thought and the conviction that there was a separate, demonic power that would become labeled "Satan" that was keeping them oppressed? So, this idea of evil power was slowly, but surely, being separated from the idea of God and became a dualistic concept of good and evil of God and Satan because Israelites could not understand when they were being faithful why God was not rescuing them from their pain.

In the text from Mark today, we have this story of Jesus being tempted by Satan and it is fascinating that, in the Gospel of Mark, there are only two verses dedicated to Jesus' struggle with Satan. In Matthew, there are 11 verses, and in Luke there are 13 verses, and the language changes from Satan to devil, then in Luke, the last sentence there is "the devil would return", so it sets up the expectation that Jesus would be struggling with the devil later on. John does not mention a struggle with Satan. There is no temptation narrative in John because John is concerned about other issues in his Gospel.

I want to start with Mark and I just want to stay there with Mark. There are two verses to talk about how we struggle with temptation and evil power and darkness. For me, as I read that text about Jesus out there in the wilderness with the wild beasts struggling with Satan, the first thing I noticed and that I think is really true is that it is difficult for us to recognize, it is difficult for us to see what evil looks like at times. In the Gospel of Mark, there is no detail about Satan. There are no details about what the temptations were, so we can only assume that identifying evil is difficult. Why is that? What we have learned through history is that identifying evil is difficult because it most often looks like us. Now, think about that. Evil takes forms in our society. It works through our actions. It works through the institutions that create. It works through the emotions that we succumb to and primarily fear. When we are fearful, we are vulnerable to darkness, and it thrives upon confusion and ambivalence and uncertainty and even laziness.

Hannah Marx, a political theorist, who was a survivor of the Holocaust, wrote a book about Adolf Eichmann and his trial in Jerusalem. If you don't know, Adolf Eichmann was one of the great purveyors of the Holocaust and of the death camps in Germany in World War II. Adolf Eichmann, of course, was an anti-Semitic person. He engaged in many acts of brutality, but Hannah Marx's thesis, after talking with him and listening to the trial of Adolf Eichmann was this: Adolf Eichmann was a fanatic or a sociopath. He was an extremely average person motivated by professional promotion and self-interest and personal gain, and his evil was banal. The subtitle of her book is "The Banality of Evil" and "banality" means "the boring, the routine and the dull". We are, in our culture, presented with images of evil that comes primarily out of Hollywood, where it is fantastic, but what Hannah Marx came to understand was that evil is actually ordinary and dull and hard to identify, especially when we are participating in it.

So, as we confront this season of Lent, it begins with Jesus struggling with the temptation of evil. It is a time in our Christian journey, in our Christian tradition, to struggle with our own temptations and to work to identify the evils that we perhaps are close to. So, I want to suggest that the struggle that we are in, the struggle to identify and the struggle with our own temptations requires at least three activities that we must be a part of. The first is this: As people of faith, we must be constantly vigilant. That means being attentive to where we are, to what we are participating in, who we are around and what we are engaging in--being vigilant for what surrounds us.

The second is, if we want to take evil and darkness of our world seriously, we have to have a sharp sense of self awareness. Do we know our fears? Do we know what we, as individuals, are frightened of? Do we know our biases? Do we know the cracks in our character that can be exploited by the darkness? Self-consciousness is critical to being able to withstand the darkness.

Third, struggling with the darkness with the Satan of our world requires a sharp sense of social awareness. That is to say, are we alert to the social forces and values that are contrary to goodness? Are we alert to those social forces that are seductive, that draw us into behaviors that we abhor in others but unconsciously participate in ourselves--social values and forces that society suspects us to participate in?

One of my great learnings on this issue had to do with when we lived in New Orleans and we had this 16 year old boy who was always out in the neighborhood, and he was always riding his skateboard around. One day he was no longer there. I used to chat with him when I was in the street. One day he was no longer there, but I saw his dad. I asked "Where's your son? I haven't seen him out lately." He said "We have moved him into a boarding school in California". I asked "Why?" He said, "Well, you know, if you try to raise children in a town that celebrates everything you want to keep them away from, it is very difficult to raise a young boy". That was a moment I thought to myself yes, we live in context where there are powers and forces at work that we need to protect ourselves from.

So, it would be nice, as the town of Inglis, Florida tried to do, to keep Satan, keep the darkness out of our lives with a simple public proclamation, but it doesn't work that way. So, as people of faith, as we begin this Lenten journey, we must remain vigilant, we must remain conscious, self-conscious, and we must lean on our faith so that we do not succumb to the darkness that is out there. Of course, out there is not complete darkness. There is much joy. There is much light, but it is the darkness that we must be prepared for. As we come together each Sunday, what we do is reinforce our faith. We reinforce our commitment to walk with Christ, who showed us a way to walk through this world in such a way to glorify God.

So, we begin this Lenten journey walking with Christ, which we know takes us to the cross, the symptoms of the powers of death in this world, and we know in the end that there is a victory over that death, but today we begin that journey. Let us do so with a conscious spirit, and a strong will, and a strong faith that God is, indeed, with us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Rev. Tom Warren, Pastor