

SERMON: 2018/02/18 (1st Sunday in Lent, Year B) - Genesis 9:8-17; 1 Peter 3:18-22 & Mark 1:9-15_BTR

[Invite the children to sit at the front.]

In films and TV there are different kinds of heroes.
For example, there's the "gunslinger!"
And...the valiant knight (in shining armour).
And what else?

[Allow the kids to offer answers, e.g. *super-heroes*, and *race-car driver*, etc.]

There's also the "jail-breaker:" he or she is a clever person, good with puzzles and picking locks and math; and, usually, they have to find ingenious ways to help their friends escape from scary prison camps or dungeons.

And why do I mention this?

Just now we heard a "snippet" of the Bible's story about Noah, and we were reminded about how, in our early history, God sought to bring an end to human violence by washing it from the face of the earth with a flood.[See: [Gen. 6:13](#)]

Now, this was an act of mercy: the people were "crazy" and lawless[v.5]; and what they needed was a *great*, big "time out."

But some say: "That's not fair. They were naughty because they didn't know any better: they had no guidance."

And it is true that we find no mention of judges or kings or prophets - *or priests(!)* - in those early chapters of *Genesis*.

Furthermore, we know that the only way to "Heaven" is 'through the death of [Jesus]' [[Rom.5:10](#)], but *they* were washed away a long, *long* time before that occurred.

So..., what happened to them?

Where *did* they "go"?

Well, Peter, in his (first) letter, tells us this morning that when Jesus died on the cross, 'He went...[down] to the spirits in [a] prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently...during the building of the ark'.

Huh? That's really intriguing.

What does he mean?

The "prison" he speaks of is Sheol.

And it is the place that the Jews believed all the dead went to wait until Judgment Day.

It is a mysterious place where it is always dark, and everyone is sad and bored.

And Jesus, He rushed down there and “*bust in!*” [air kick], and “proclaimed” the Gospel, and offered those “spirits” who were floating there freedom to join Him - by faith - in the new Kingdom, which is coming!
Isn't that *amazing?*[n.1]

Let's pray: Father God, we give you thanks that your justice is perfect [Deut. 32.4], and that you judge us and love us based not (just) on what we do, but also by our circumstances. We pray that the knowledge of Jesus' brave rescue of the spirits in Sheol would inspire us to live and share our faith in Him with more passion, amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

What were the Devil's first words to Jesus, do you think?

(When they met in the Judean desert after Christ's baptism.)

Have you ever imagined that?

In Mark's gospel we hear that he tempted Him for *forty, long* days, and that had to have a beginning, right?

I mean, what were his *very* first words?

Admittedly, they'd met before, don't forget: Jesus is (merely) the enfleshed pre-incarnate, *eternal* “Son” who was - He Himself tells us in *Luke* - present when Lucifer and his angels were thrown down to earth ‘like lightning’ before human history [10:18], but that was, literally, as far as we can tell, *billions* of years ago in another “lifetime”...

So, what did the Devil say?

After all, our author is silent on the details.

In my mind's “eye,” I picture it almost as if it happened in a bar on a Friday night:

there was our Saviour, enjoying a quiet drink by himself. Tall, ruggedly handsome - if a little lean from fasting [see: Mt. 4:2].

Bearded, naturally.

Olive skin.

Almond-coloured eyes.

A pint of something cool in his hand.

And then - *suddenly(!)* - an annoying presence at his elbow:

a stranger leaning in too close;

invading his personal space.

(Yes, ladies?

You've all been there?)

“Hi! [Taps chest with both hands.] Satan.

I couldn't help noticing you.

Have we met?”

Of course, the Devil wasn't just another prying punter, looking for a date.

My image would be more accurate if I took the Devil from the public side of the

counter and placed him on the barman's side - as the owner of this fictional establishment, for, we are told, in *John* 12:31, that he is '*the ruler* of this world'. That's right, hear me: what the Bible tells us is that he isn't waiting for us with a pitchfork down in some fiery pit beneath our feet, Satan is, in fact, among us. And not just that, he's calling the shots.

Pulling the strings.

Slinging the stones 'and arrows of outrageous fortune.'

And we know this to be true: our experience *proves* that this is the case.

Consider this week's massacre in Florida, for example.

The Governor, Rick Scott, asked reporters in his statement at a press conference: "How could this ever happen...?"^[n.2]

"This is just *pure* evil," he added, as if that clarification were needed,^[n.3].

And I don't doubt it.

Do you?

The murderer, having shot *seventeen* of his classmates dead, then went to Walmart and for lunch at McDonald's - as if his shooting-spree was simply one of a number of humdrum, ordinary errands that he had to run that day.^[n.4]

Part of me is hopeful that they will find he was suffering from a severe mental illness, but, you know what?

Let's be clear: we don't know if the voices he said he heard arose only from a chemical imbalance.^[n.5]

Or that such a thing, if true, was even a *sufficient* cause (by itself) to make him do what he did.

Not likely.

But we can rely on the Apostle Peter's warning to us that, '[I]ike a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.'^[1 Pet. 5:8]

And our lives, our relationships, our country - these are his hunting-grounds.

Indeed, Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians, goes as far as to describe him as '*the god* of this world[, who] has blinded the minds of [mankind], to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.'^[4:4]

When Jesus is "driven" 'out into the wilderness', therefore, now fully empowered by the Holy Spirit on a mission from the *real* God - the one who actually created the universe, He was stumbling into the den - the pen - the lair - *the kingdom* - not of His father, but of one committed to tearing it down; destroying it.

My point, then, is this: our Lord's ministry was not being played out in his home stadium: this was an *away* game.

And a lonely one at that.

In front of a hostile crowd.

Jesus, in other words, was caught in a duel.

And everything He was going to do - His miracles, His preaching, *His death* - would be an "uphill battle" *unless* He found a way to overcome His opponent at the first hurdle; a way to intimidate him; to *block* him.

And that's what He does.

Again, we're provided with only a few of the specifics.

Matthew describes some verbal sparring [4:3-10], but the outcome, at least, in *Mark*, is made clear:

In chapter three, some "scribes" have come up from Jerusalem having heard these too-good-to-be-true reports about lots of possessed people being cured of their demons, and they accuse Jesus of being successful by being *in collusion* with the entities He was "casting out!"

But Jesus shuts them down, replying:

'[N]o one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up th[at] strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.' [v.27]

Their encounter in the desert, in other words, had culminated in the Devil becoming restrained in some fashion; diminished; countered; 'disarmed', [Col. 2:15].

And this was *essential*.

Because as soon as Jesus received His commission in the Jordan by the Spirit and began to perform His 'mighty[,*miraculous*] deeds' [Lk. 1:51], the countdown clock to Calvary began ticking - and He didn't have long:

His challenge to the Romans and the Sadducees - the challenge that Christian faithfulness presents to the status quo - is *deeply* subversive - a rebellion.

Don't be a consumer, it says.

Don't run yourself ragged in the "rat race."

Don't settle for "business as usual," for mediocrity, for lies and hypocrisy and only cosmetic fixes.

And that attack on the system couldn't - wouldn't - and *won't(!)* - be met with silence from those entangled and *invested* in the mess of this "fallen" world.

No, they fight back.

We fight back.

In *2 Timothy* it explains how we're 'captive to do [the Devil's] will', [2:26].

That, in *Colossians*, we're *deceived* by his 'hollow..philosophy', [2:8].

And so we wilfully participate in perpetuating Satan's hateful regime. [See: *Jn. 8:44*]

A sort of collective "Stockholm Syndrome."

And yet don't you want to be free of it?

I do.

And not just because the lives of the unrighteous are their own damnation, though this is undoubtedly true:

'I see this every day, and so do you. People choose to live in their own hells all the time. We do it every time we isolate ourselves, give the cold shoulder to someone who has slighted us, every time we hide knives in our words, every time we harden our hearts in defiance of what we know to be the loving, good, and right thing to do.'^[n.6]

As it says in *Proverbs*, '[sinful fools] will eat the fruit of their ways', ^[1:31]. 'The[ir] deeds...ensnare them', ^[5:20].

But Jesus, by His own admission, bound the Devil for a reason, and that was to prepare him for being cast - on the last day - 'into [an] eternal...fire prepared for [him]', ^[Mt. 25:41], which is to say, into a '*literal* place of [*un-earhtly*] punishment', ^[n.7]

And I don't want to go down with that (doomed) ship!
Nor should you.

The thing is, however, that, like Christ, our time to do the will of God - which is, specifically, in *our* case, to "*repent*" - is limited: Yes, to say "sorry" - to admit our faults - only takes a second, but He desires - and deserves - that we 'seek [H]im with [our] *whole* heart' ^[Ps. 119:2], and that will involve, observes the Psalmist, that 'I meditate and search my spirit', ^[77:6]; that we '[e]xamine... [and] test [ourselves]''to see whether [we] are in the faith', ^[2 Cor. 13:5], which is what this season of Lent is all about.

Let's take, then, a moment to reflect.

Footnotes:

1. Be aware that this is a contentious interpretation. See: Scaer, David P. (March 1992), 'He Did Descend to Hell: In Defense of the Apostles' Creed', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Volume 35, No. 1, pp. 91-99.
2. Segarra, Lisa Marie; Reilly, Katie; Meixler, Eli and Calfas, Jennifer (14th of February 2018), 'Suspect Went to Walmart and McDonald's After Killing 17, Police Say: The Latest on the Florida School Shooting', *Time*, available at <http://time.com/5158678/what-to-know-about-the-active-shooter-situation-at-florida-high-school/> (accessed February 16, 2018).
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. Duan, Christy (15th of February 2018), 'Florida shooting raises awareness of stigma attached to mental illness', *ABCNews*, available at <http://abcnews.go.com/amp/Health/florida-shooting-raises-awareness-stigma-attached-mental-illness/story?id=53128272> (accessed February 16, 2018).
6. Bell, Rob (2011), *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of*

- Every Person*, New York, N. Y.: HarperOne, 114.
7. Chan, Francis and Sprinkle, Preston (2011), *Erasing Hell: What God said about eternity, and the things we've made up*, Colorado Springs, C. O.: David Cook, 59.