

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

October 29, 2023 – REFORMATION SUNDAY OBSERVED

The Rev. Dr. Nina George–Hacker

Sermon: “*God’s Love—Revealed in Scripture, Deployed by Faith*”*

Jeremiah 31:31-34	(God’s new covenant will write His laws on His people’s hearts)
Psalms 46	(The Lord is our refuge and strength when in trouble)
Romans 3:19-28	(We are justified with God by faith apart from works)
St. John 8:31-36	(Jesus, who is the Truth, sets us free from being enslaved by sin)

This morning, both our opening and closing hymns are about spiritual warfare. So, what does that have to do with the Protestant Reformation, which we commemorate today? Martin Luther, John Calvin, Philip Melancthon, Thomas Cranmer, William Tyndale, and other heroes of the 16th Century Reformation knew well that ever since Jesus walked the earth, the devil has been trying to destroy His work, either through His Church or His followers.

Part of the great revelation of God to the Reformers was the truth that those who believe in Christ can have a direct relationship with Him—without requiring the mediation of the Church or the clergy. Moreover, the Reformers realized that if the Bible were translated into the local languages of the people, they could read it for themselves, and ask the Holy Spirit to interpret it for them. No longer would individual believers have to rely on the Papal Magisterium or their local priest to tell them what the Holy Scriptures teach.

The Reformers understood that we come to faith through the reading, exposition, study, and preaching of the Bible. Moreover, that the Word of God, along with the faith we gain from knowing its Author and the truth therein, are powerful weapons in the spiritual war believers fight daily. The devil would not like this change in the Church, because now the average Christian would have a lot more ammunition in the fight for spiritual victory.

As St. Paul wrote in Ephesians 6 (I’m reading from ‘The Message’ translation): “Take everything the Master has set out for you, well-made weapons of the best materials. And put them to use so you will be able to stand up to everything the Devil throws your way. This is no weekend war that we’ll walk away from and forget about in a couple of hours. This is for keeps, a life-or-death fight to the finish against the Devil and all his angels. Be prepared. You’re up against far more than you can handle on your own. Take all the help you can get, every weapon God has issued, so that when it’s all over but the shouting you’ll still be on your feet. Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation are more than words. Learn how to apply them. You’ll need them throughout your life. God’s Word is an indispensable weapon. In the same way, prayer is essential in this ongoing warfare.”

Since we first heard the news from Israel on Saturday, October 7th, and as I’ve listened to CNN TV and WITF radio; overheard people talking in stores; and lent my ears to your concerns; I’ve noticed the shockingly horrific events of that day have prompted more conversations about evil than I have heard in awhile, possibly not since September 11th, 2001.

“Evil” seems to be word most often used to describe the brutal carnage of the Hamas terrorists’ unexpected attack on and invasion of the Nation of Israel. It is unthinkable to us that normal human beings could commit such cold-blooded rape, torture, and murder, slaughtering innocent men, women, and infants. Our minds reel as we try to imagine how *anyone* could do that. As we continue processing the distressing events of the past three weeks, it seems as though both the people of Israel—and those in Palestine and Gaza who are *not* part of Hamas, ISIS, or Hezbollah—are up against a threat that is more than human. Some say it is the work of the devil.

Whether you believe that evil comes from the unchanging nature of the human heart, is intrinsic to unjust social structures, or is the work of an active, malevolent supernatural power or being, I think most of you would agree: there is evil in the world. All you have to do is read or watch the news—especially these days.

At the same time Israel is under attack, the unprovoked conflict in Ukraine drags on as Russian soldiers commit one war crime after another. The people of Afghanistan are being oppressed and murdered by the terrorist thugs who took over after the U.S. pulled out. Corruption, unrest, violence, starvation and famine characterize too many places in Africa, and several countries in South America are dominated by drug cartels that don't hesitate to destroy people and property. Closer to home, on October 16th, a Chicago landlord named Joseph Czuba stabbed and killed a 6-year-old tenant and seriously wounded the boy's mother, just because they were Palestinian-Americans.

Webster's dictionary offers several definitions of 'evil': that which is morally reprehensible, sinful, wicked; arising from bad character or conduct; causing discomfort or repulsion; causing harm; pernicious; marked by misfortune; wrongdoing; a cosmic evil force; something that brings sorrow, distress, or calamity.

Okay, so we agree there is evil in the world. Think what you like about its root cause, but the Bible cites two sources: The activity of the devil, also called the adversary, the evil one, or Satan, and the darkness of the human heart. In Mark 7:21-23, we read: "For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person...."

In the King James Version of Jeremiah 17:9, we find a verse that was drummed into my head as a kid: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" Apart from a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, the human heart is desperately wicked. True, God has placed a conscience within each of us. But we are incapable of listening to and following our conscience unless we have first welcomed the Spirit of God into our hearts. Even when Christ dwells within us as the Holy Spirit, we are still not free from temptation or sin—but we can recognize these more easily, are more aware that we ought to repent, and are assured that we will be forgiven.

The Bible is clear about the flawed, dangerous nature of our unsaved humanity. Yet the Scriptures also acknowledge a supernatural cause at work in the evil that abounds in our world. In Hebrew, his name is *ha Sa-tán*, which means "the Adversary," or the devil. In case you don't believe he exists, Satan is mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments 54 times and the term 'devil' occurs 37 times.

In the Book of Job, we read how Satan accuses and slanders those who love God. In John 8:44, Jesus speaks of the devil, saying: "He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies." Jesus ought to know. After all, wasn't He Himself tempted by the devil?

Elsewhere in Scripture, the devil is called the "accuser of the brethren," the "evil one," the "prince of demons" and "the god of this age." He is described as planting doubts in the minds of believers; instigating jealousy; tempting believers to immorality and lying; hindering answers to prayer; and fostering arrogant pride. If the devil can do these things to *believers*, can you imagine the influence he has on those who *don't even know God*? I think we're seeing a lot of evidence of *that* in the world today.

Martin Luther, the courageous Roman Catholic monk whose valid criticisms of the excesses and unbiblical practices of the established Church set off an international reformation, knew well what it was like to fight the devil. In 1530, he penned a letter to a close friend, Jerome Weller, who was struggling with spiritual despair. In it, Luther wrote:

"You say that the temptation is heavier than you can bear, and that you fear that it will so break and beat you down as to drive you to despair and blasphemy. I know this wile of the devil. If he cannot break a person with his first attack, he tries by persevering to wear him out and weaken him until the person falls and confesses himself beaten. ...

In this sort of temptation and struggle, contempt is the best and easiest method of [gaining victory] over the devil. Laugh your adversary to scorn and ask who it is with whom you are talking.

By all means flee solitude, for the devil watches and lies in wait for you most of all when you are alone. This devil is conquered by mocking and despising him, not by resisting and arguing with him.

When the devil throws our sins up to us and declares we deserve death and hell, we ought to speak thus: ‘I admit that I deserve death and hell. What of it? Does this mean that I shall be sentenced to eternal damnation? By no means. For I know One who suffered and made a satisfaction in my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Where He is, there I shall be also.’”¹

Luther’s teaching, and that of the Reformation, is often summarized as three “*solas*.” *Sola gratia*, *sola fide* and *sola Scriptura*—by grace *alone*, by faith *alone*, and by Scripture *alone*. In these we find the principal key to reformation theology: God’s love for us.

By grace alone—God gives His mercy freely. We can’t earn or bring about by our own efforts His love or forgiveness.

By faith alone—those who believe in Jesus Christ as God’s savior of all humankind receive forgiveness and eternal life.

By scripture alone—God has revealed His truth through the Holy Bible, the one trustworthy source for the truth about God (and about ourselves). Thanks to the Reformation, we have the Scripture in our own language and because of our personal faith, we read it in the light of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Never before had God-in-person died so that *everyone*’s sins—even those of terrorists, murderers, kidnappers, and drug dealers—could be forgiven.

The ancient prophet Jonah resented God’s forgiveness of the Ninevites—in present times, that would be the Iraqis. But the Book of Jonah shows us that the Lord’s radical mercy is for *anyone*—no matter how greatly they were gripped by evil before—as long as they repent of that evil and come to Him. So doesn’t this mean we should be *praying hard for the conversion* of all these seemingly inhuman people we are hearing about?

The Reformation reminds us that God’s love is revealed to us in **Scripture**, and then deployed *for good and against* evil by our **faith**, which we have received through God’s **grace**. As a result, the ultimate victory is ours through our Lord Jesus Christ!

Soli Deo Gratias! To God alone be all glory. *Amen.*

* Adapt. N. George Hacker, “The Armor of God,” 27 October 2002, Wesley Grove United Methodist Church, Gaithersburg MD. Used with permission.

¹ Justin Taylor, ed. “A Letter from Martin Luther on Spiritual Warfare,” The Gospel Coalition, 13 January 2012 <<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/a-letter-from-martin-luther-on-spiritual-warfare/>> 23 October 2023.