

Dealing with the Devil: Part 1

[Job 1:1-2:10](#)

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This is the first sermon a two-part series called “Dealing with the Devil.” As I mentioned in The Chronicle, this topic came to me in Confirmation class this spring, when one of our students asked Todd and me if we believe in Satan. I gave a quick answer that night. I said something like, “I don’t believe in Satan as this real, literal bad guy who goes around doing terrible things. But I do believe in evil, both individual evil and institutional evil.” I’ve been wanting to say more on this topic ever since, because I don’t think we have to believe in the devil, in the traditional sense, to deal with all the devil represents: evil that is around us, and evil that is within us.

This week, I'm thinking about the first thing, the evil around us, and how the figure of Satan might help us to talk about it. I'm going to get there in a roundabout way, though. First I want to share how I began thinking theologically about the devil. Like many things, it began, for me, with literature.

I'll back up.

I've had a few "odd jobs" in my life, odder, even, than being a pastor at First UCC. I've worked on a rape crisis hotline; a copyeditor for a medical historian; a student assistant in not one, not two, but three school libraries; I even spent one memorable summer on the assembly line in a chocolate factory.

But that's a story for another sermon.

The job experience I'm thinking about today took place shortly after I graduated from college. A mentor of mine, an academic, was taking a fall semester sabbatical to Switzerland. She brought her two children, boys aged 11 and 13, with her, and

she needed someone to care for them and home-school them so they could jump back into school in America in the spring.

So I was essentially a governess.

It should be noted that I was 23 years old and had no idea what I was doing. I had no training in child development, no real experience as an educator, and very few resources like textbooks or curriculum. I did have a recent degree in English from Wellesley College and a lot of enthusiasm, and so it was I decided it would be a really good idea for us to study *Paradise Lost*, the epic blank-verse poem by 17th century poet John Milton.

The boys and I would sit on a hotel balcony, the actual Swiss Alps stretched out behind us, and I would read aloud carefully chosen excerpts of Milton's tale of the Angelic War over heaven and the fall of the rebel angels; the rise of Lucifer and his evil scheme to sabotage Adam and Eve; and Satan's inevitable

punishment by the same wrathful God who foresaw the whole thing before it even happened.

Maria Von Trapp I was not.

But those boys, bless their hearts, they loved it, and they picked right up on something that scholars have debated for centuries. Is Satan the hero or the villain of this story? Milton paints a confusing portrait. You know Satan is the bad guy, but at the same time, he's courageous, charismatic, smart, funny, great in battle: qualities that we associate with protagonists, not antagonists.

I'll never forget when the 11-year-old, Nick, literally began playing Devil's Advocate. I actually wrote down this conversation after it took place because it struck me so deeply at the time.

"I like Satan!" Nick said. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but I like him!"

"Can you explain why?" I asked.

“Because God is being totally unfair!” he answered. “Satan doesn’t deserve to be punished for something that God knew was going to happen! It’s the same with Adam and Eve. God could have kept them from disobeying and then nothing bad would’ve happened. Isn’t God supposed to love us?”

“But Nick, you don’t get it,” his older brother Chris explained. “God knows that Adam and Eve are going to mess up, but it’s okay because God gets to be merciful later by giving us Jesus!”

Nick was not buying this. “I don’t like that at all,” he said. “I don’t want to believe in that kind of God, one that would do something like that.”

That 11-year-old boy was and is in good company. You might ask the exact same question after reading the Book of Job. Readers of the Bible are sometimes caught off guard by the premise of this story. Here’s Satan: not a big red scary guy, deep in hell with with horns and pitchfork, but a member of God’s divine

council. Not only that, it's God who gets the whole Job-torture-thing rolling. "Have you considered my servant, Job?" God says. "He's a great guy, very loyal!" Satan points out, rightly, that it's easy to be pious and faithful when life is going well. But what happens when things fall apart? It's a fair question, and, apparently, a great basis for a wager.

So God gives Satan permission to ruin Job's life. To take away everyone and everything that Job has. *It's God's idea.* In the Book of Job, Satan isn't separate from God, or the bitter enemy of God. He's an *extension* of God's agenda. And if Satan represents everything that can go wrong in human life—destruction, cruelty, betrayal, meaningless suffering—then, according to this story, those things belong to God too.

Do you want to believe in that kind of God, one that would do something like that?

This would be a good time to mention, as I often find myself doing, that the Bible may not be the most reliable source material for answering profound theological questions like these. Or, let me put another way: the Bible is not the most *consistent* source material when it comes to matters of good and evil and the nature of God. And why would it be? It's a library, not a single book. A library of stories told over thousands and thousands of years, gathered from across different ancient Near Eastern cultures. A multiplicity of voices, all weighing in on the central questions of human existence, including why bad things happen to good people, and why God permits *evil* to exist.

The Book of Job offers one, long, confusing explanation that may or may not be satisfying to you, depending on who you are and how you understand God. I would encourage us to focus less on whether the story makes philosophical sense, and more on whether it makes *emotional* sense. And I think this image of

God and Satan randomly deciding to test Job makes *a lot* of emotional sense.

Who hasn't felt like the universe is toying with them? Who hasn't felt like life is fundamentally unfair? Who hasn't felt like terrible things, disturbing things, evil things happen for no good reason? Who hasn't been Job and asked, "Why me?" Who hasn't looked upon a Job-like figure in their lives, and thought, "There is nothing adequate to say in the face of this pain?"

Therein lies the truth of the Book of Job. Sometimes, human suffering is simply beyond comprehension. But Job makes a parallel claim: that human faithfulness is *a/so* beyond comprehension. Job remains faithful to God far beyond what is reasonable or logical or evidence-based.

"I don't want to believe in that kind of God, one that would do something like that," Nick said.

The good news is, we don't have to believe that way, even though that version of God is part of our tradition. Our tradition is complicated. Our tradition contains multitudes. Our tradition is based in real human experiences of good and evil, of joy and suffering. This character of Satan is one way our ancestors of faith talked about those experiences, processed them, tried to make sense of them. And these ancient stories can give us clues about how we might do the same.

Look at Job. Job remains loyal to God throughout his ordeal, because his faith in God is anchored *not* in what God gives him, but in what God *is*. In other words, the relationship between God and Job isn't transactional: I'll believe in you in exchange for happiness and wealth and protection from Satan.

The relationship between God and Job is based in something else: something more realistic, less contingency-based. Something that can withstand even the worst

Satan has to offer. What is it that keeps Job tethered to God? The answer seems to begin with awe. Later in the book, when God finally speaks to Job through the whirlwind, this is what God says:

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

Who determined its measurements—surely you know!

Or who stretched the line upon it?

On what were its bases sunk,

or who laid its cornerstone

when the morning stars sang together

and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

(Job 38:4-7)

The enormity of God, the creative power of universe, the mystery of the divine: it humbles Job. It pushes him to acknowledge that God is more vast, more complex than he could ever understand.

When evil seems most overwhelming, God overwhelms evil itself.

Elie Wiesel, the great writer and theologian and survivor of the Holocaust, who knew something about evil, described it as having faith based in “perplexity more than piety.”

What in this world perplexes and humbles you? I don't mean what makes you feel shamed or insignificant, but what is it that makes you feel like you're a part of something much, much larger? Something beyond human invention?

Is it the miracle of love? The miracle of existence? Is it science? The natural world? The improbability of the Big Bang, the spark that set all this beauty and chaos and pain in motion? Is it a feeling of gratitude, or trust, or something you can't even quite name? I think that, there, is God. Or the direction that God might be found. Not the God of human imagining, a ruler sitting up in heaven with a sidekick named Satan. Not a God who permits

evil to happen, because that's a human thing to do and a human way to think about it.

I'm talking about the true God, the God that is beyond our understanding but still, somehow, within our grasp, whether we are 11 or 23 or 36 or 88, waiting for us to experience her, to lean on her, to be transformed by our knowledge of her.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.