

Pentecost 9C + July 17, 2016
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit

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I was going to open this sermon by asking, “What does God look like? What do you see when you think of God?”, taking our cue from what Sue read a few minutes ago in Paul’s letter to the Colossians. For as we learned there, Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible, or unseen, God—a human being just like us in every way, but without sin, one who knows our sufferings through his own.

But now a very different question hangs heavily in the air: What does evil look like?

We have a chilling new image—that of a monstrous 19-ton white truck, unmarked and expressionless. I hope no one has taken or posted videos of the mile-long act of carnage Thursday night in Nice, that stunningly beautiful city along the French Riviera. But there are clips online from just beforehand, who knows why they were taken, of that faceless white behemoth gliding silently down a dark street on its way to the boardwalk. Because we know where the truck is headed, this is just about as chilling an image as I can recall seeing in recent years.

We KNOW that goodness is stronger than evil. Scripture tells us so, and the prophets of our own time tell us so. If you are able, take a look in the red hymnal at hymn 721. It is a prayer written by South African Archbishop emeritus Desmond Tutu, whose outspoken opposition to apartheid brought about the fall of that oppressive system. It is a modest hymn with a big heart:

*Goodness is stronger than evil;
love is stronger than hate;
Light is stronger than darkness;
life is stronger than death.
Victory is ours, victory is ours
Through him who loved us.*

We know that goodness is stronger than evil. We know this from scripture. We also know that God is ruler of the universe. Yet, as the Bible tells us clearly, Satan is still loose in the world. “Discipline yourselves, keep alert,” we read in 1 Peter 5:8. “Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.” And Paul makes clear in Ephesians 6:12 that “our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” Martin Luther knew this better than anyone. Do you recall the second part of the first stanza of “A Mighty Fortress”? “The old satanic foe / has sworn to work us woe! / With craft and dreadful might / he arms himself to fight. / On earth he has no equal.”

So what are we do to? Pray, pray without ceasing, if you can. And in our own lives, try to give the devil as few opportunities as possible to sow seeds of chaos.

But we must also use the tools of good government that God has given us. Perhaps you recall what President Obama said about evil at the memorial service in Dallas for the five police officers who were killed. He said, “We know there is evil in the world. It’s why we need police departments.”

This is a profound theological statement. Martin Luther condemned the devil as “our chief enemy” whose sole purpose and desire it is to take away or interfere with all we have received from God. Satan is not satisfied with overthrowing the spiritual order, Luther said, but also “prevents and impedes the establishment of any kind of government or honorable and peaceful relations on earth.”¹

Good government alone, and all the protections it affords, will not drive out the devil, but it will help. Satan’s final defeat will come only at the consummation of the Reign of God, for which God has given us Jesus Christ as the first fruits and the Holy Spirit as a down payment. To be saved, to experience salvation, is to share—right here and right now—in the enterprise that is the kingdom of God.

As Christians, we recognize the Christ alive among us, but also in God’s mighty acts throughout history. As a 2nd century bishop wrote of Jesus, “In Abel he was slain; in Isaac bound; in Jacob a stranger; in Joseph sold; in Moses exposed; in David persecuted; in the prophets dishonored. He became incarnate of the Virgin. He was buried in the earth but rose from the dead, and was lifted up into the heights of heaven. He is the silent lamb, the slain lamb.” He is God, here among us. And now, in times like these when we are tempted by evil to despair, let us sit as Jesus’ feet just as Mary does in Luke’s tender story of Mary and Martha—listening, alert, eager to hear and eager to receive.

Thanks be to God for the victory over death in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Amen.

¹ *The Book of Concord: Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000, p. 451.