

I Saw Satan Falling Like Lightning from Heaven
A Sermon on Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Proper 9
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Introduction

Today I want to talk about Satan and demons. And I want to take them seriously. No, I am not turning fundamentalist. And no, I do not need a therapist.

The gospels take Satan and demons seriously, and we should, too. The Jesus Seminar considers the verse, “I saw Satan falling like lightning from heaven,” to be pink. In their color-coding scheme that means it is possibly an authentic saying of the historical Jesus.

Jesus was in his right mind when he said that. He is speaking wisdom that is just as deep today as it was in 2,000 years ago. He is speaking on the other side of the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution. We can no longer believe in heaven as someplace up above or in Satan and demons as real beings. We can believe, though, that they represent something very real.

First Move: Experiencing Satan and Demons

Science has produced a materialist worldview in the past 400 years. A worldview is a lens through which people look at the world. It reflects the unspoken assumptions of an age. Everyone simply accepts it. It is the air we breathe. In a materialist worldview, what’s really real is what you can see and touch, something that can be the subject of a scientific experiment. Organisms are activated by biological urges to survive. There is no higher purpose. The world is indifferent to the fate of the individual. There is no place for the supernatural.

Math and science are the focus of public education. Schools are cutting back on art and music. Colleges are phasing out liberal-arts programs. Education is seen as training people for a job instead of helping people learn to think for themselves.

A worldview is invisible until the cracks start to show because it no longer explains everything. That is what is happening today. People hunger for authentic spirituality because there is no place for it in a materialist worldview. Material prosperity and technological advances are not enough. We know there is more to life than what we can see and touch.

We have a sense that there are forces at work in the world that are bigger than any of us. Walter Wink, a New Testament scholar and theologian, talks about these forces in a three-volume set, *The Powers That Be*.

Institutions have a spirituality. This church has a personality. You can feel it when you walk in the door. It was here before us and it will be here when we are gone.

Multi-national corporations have a spirituality: Amazon, Google, WalMart. They have a workplace ethos. Nations have a spirituality: the United States, Mexico, France, Norway. They have cultural values.

Wink calls this spirituality an inner essence, an ethos. With individuals, we call it an interior life. One reason that churches have been declining is that they have neglected the interior life. Mainline churches focus on social justice and political activism. Evangelicals focus on a personal relationship with Jesus and eternal salvation. Churches in the middle focus on being a nice person: friendly, caring, loving.

We need more than material reality. We need transcendence. Instead of God up above, we look for God deep inside us. We have a sense believe that there is a power of goodness in the world that cares about us. We also have a sense that there are forces of evil at work in the world. These forces of evil are bigger than any institutions. These forces of evil endure when the institutions pass away.

Racism is an example of a spirituality of evil. Racism manifests itself today in mass incarceration. More African-Americans are incarcerated and on parole today than were enslaved before the Civil War. As Michelle Alexander writes in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, African Americans and white Americans have about the same rate of drug usage, but African Americans are four times as likely to be arrested for drug use.

Criminal-justice reforms are not enough. Abolishing the death penalty is not enough. The underlying racism is still in people's hearts and minds. It will simply morph into another institution. It began as slavery, then after the Civil War, it mutated into black codes, which restricted freedom of movement for African Americans and compelled them to work for sharecropper wages. Then it mutated again into poll taxes that took away the right of African Americans to vote and Jim Crow laws that legalized segregation and inequality. After the Civil Rights movement did away with Jim Crow in the 1960s, it mutated again into a campaign for Law and Order and a War on Drugs. The result was mass incarceration.

It has already expanded into hatred of Latino immigrants and hatred of Muslims. We put Latinos in prisons on the border and we demonize Muslims. It may

not be constructive to continue to call it racism. People get defensive and stop listening when they are accused of racism. I would call it dehumanization. We dehumanize the other and treat him or her as a thing instead of a person. They need to be controlled and kept in their place, out of white people's space.

Michelle Alexander believes it is not so much hatred of the other, as simply not caring about the other. We don't care that they suffer. We rationalize that they brought it on themselves. Martin Luther King recognized this. He saw that blindness and indifference to racial groups contribute more than racial hostility to the creation and maintenance of racial caste systems. It is indifference to the plight of other races that supports Jim Crow and mass incarceration.

Second Move: Engaging Satan and the Demons

People in the Biblical world experienced the same forces of evil. They called those forces Satan and demons.

Jesus sends out 70 or 72 followers to combat the spirituality of evil. About half of the ancient Greek manuscripts use 70; the other half use 72. This story appears only in the Gospel of Luke. There is an earlier story in Luke 9 where Jesus sends out the 12 disciples with no staff, no bag, no bread, no money. That same story also appears in Mark and Matthew. This story about sending out the 70 or 72 is an expansion of the mission. It is an anticipation of the mission of the church in the Acts of the Apostles, which scholars believe was written by the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke. The numbers 70 or 72 may well represent the numbers of nations in the Table of Nations in Genesis 10. The Hebrew text of Genesis has 70 nations; the Greek text has 72. The followers of Jesus are sent out to all the nations. It also is more democratic. Jesus may have only had about 70 followers at this point in his ministry. All his followers are sent out into mission instead of just a few chosen missionaries.

Harvest in the Old Testament is a metaphor for the gathering of Israel in the end times. This is not the end of the world. It is the end of the age when all the Gentiles will gather at Yahweh's holy mountain to worship Yahweh together with the Israelites. The end times will be marked by a final conflict between God and Satan, when God ultimately subdues the forces of evil. It will be a new age of peace that the prophets longed for. The lion will lie down with the lamb. Swords will be beaten into plowshares.

Harvest is a time of great urgency. The crop may spoil. The command not to greet anyone on the road underscores the urgency.

Jesus tells his followers that they are to be non-violent. He sends them as lambs in the midst of wolves. They are not to respond to evil with evil. They are not to carry

anything with them to defend themselves. They are to be totally dependent on the hospitality of the people that they meet. When they enter a house, they are to say, “Peace to this house.” This is the peace that only God can bring. If there is a son of peace, God’s peace will be rest upon him. A son of peace is a child of God, someone who is open to the kingdom. The followers are to remain in the house and to eat and drink whatever is set before them. This also may be an anticipation of the elimination of restrictions on dietary laws that is described in the Acts of the Apostles.

This is not charity. The worker is deserving of his wages. The work is proclaiming that the kingdom of God has drawn near and healing the sick, bringing the outcasts back into community.

If the followers enter a city and they are not received, they are to wipe the dust of the city off the soles of their feet. The time of judgment is near. They have delivered the word of the kingdom and the people have rejected it.

When the 70 or 72 return, the verses become saturated with eschatology. Eschatology is about the cosmic clash between good and evil, between an authentic spirituality and a spirituality of evil. I have highlighted the eschatological words on the screen. There are two or three words in each verse: joy, demons, name, Satan, heaven, authority and power, snakes and scorpions and hostile forces.

The 70 or 72 are *joyful*. Joy is a sign of the eschaton—people are joyful that salvation has come. Jesus has given his *power and authority* to his followers, and *the demons* recognize their power and authority. The demons submit to *the name* of Jesus. The name is powerful. It conjures forth the person of Jesus.

It is a different type of power and authority from the violence of the nations. When the followers proclaim that the kingdom of God has drawn near, the people are free to say Yes or No.

When the followers are out on their mission, Jesus has a vision that Satan is falling like lightning from heaven. The power of evil is being overthrown. Walter Wink says that Satan no longer wears the cloak of invisibility—he is brought out into the open. He can no longer subconsciously coerce people into conforming with the spirituality of evil. Satan is not thrown down once and for all. Satan is thrown down whenever people are liberated. Wink says, “Whenever people recognize that they are not powerless before injustice, but can change themselves and change things, Satan is cast down.”

Jesus tells the disciples that they should not be rejoicing that the demons are submitting to them. That is rejoicing in themselves. They should be rejoicing that the kingdom is spreading. Their names will be written down in the book of life as citizens of the kingdom.

Third Move: The Nonviolent Life

Satan and the demons represent the inner dimension of a spirituality of evil that inhabits institutions and people. They do not exist outside of the institutions and people they inhabit. They are symbols that bring the inner spirituality to light. They are most powerful when they are invisible, when people are not aware that they are acting under the power of these forces. When they are exposed and brought to light, people can deal with them.

I am finishing my first year of classes in the Doctor of Ministry program at Phillips Seminary. Instead of writing a dissertation at the end of the program to pull together what we have learned, we create a project of ministry for our congregations and evaluate it.

My project will be modeled on an image that I have always been struck with. It comes from our friend, John Dear, the Catholic peacemaker. He says that our congregations should be laboratories for nonviolence or schools for nonviolence. If we are going to repent of our old way of living and turn to new life in Christ, we need to know what we are turning away from. That is the kind of help our churches should be giving us.

I would use John's book, *The Nonviolent Life*, as a guide. We studied it on Wednesday nights five years ago. John says that there are three aspects to the nonviolent life: (1) nonviolence toward ourselves, (2) nonviolence toward other people, and (3) participation in the global grassroots movement of nonviolence. I would lead a 12-week course, two hours each week. It would cover these three aspects of the nonviolent life, four weeks on each aspect. I also would incorporate ideas from other experts in nonviolence. I would ask each member of the class to keep a journal for the 12 weeks so that we can evaluate where they are on their journey and whether they are moving forward.

I believe that the nonviolent life is our best hope for overcoming the spirituality of evil that tortures us and that infects our institutions. We cannot move past racism and dehumanization unless we change people's hearts and minds. Politics can't do that. Our politics is consumed with winning. You can't get rid of ourselves and our society of violence by winning. Passing laws and enforcing laws can't do it either. You can't legislate your way into a healthy spirituality.

Nonviolence is about caring and listening. We are nonviolent because God causes the sun to rise and the rain to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous. God cares for all of us. God cares for every plant and animal, every part of creation. Each of us is a beloved creation of God. If God cares about us, we should care about each other.

We care for ourselves. We look at the triggers that cause us to get angry and violent. We look into the dark, violent places from our past and hold them in silence, freeing us from their grip over us.

We care for other people. We don't get too eager to persuade them of our own wisdom. We listen to them. If they lash out at us, we ask them to tell us more. What makes you feel that way? Real communication is possible only if we show the other person that we care about them and respect their beliefs. This is hardest for the people we are closest to: our spouses, our children, our best friends. We have established ways of talking to each other. Sharon Strand Ellison, a psychologist who teaches nonviolent communication, says that we are like flies circling in a jar. If you take the lid off the jar, we still fly in circles around each other.

We care for all parts of creation. We care for the planet and we try to be good stewards. We try to reduce our footprint. We care for people who are suffering from systemic injustice and systemic poverty. We work with other people of good faith to bring the spirituality of evil in our institutions to light.

Refusing to care for people is the great problem that faces us today. It is the cause of the divisions that fracture our society. Michelle Alexander concludes that our hope is "for a world in which we see each other fully, learn from each other and respond to each other in love." That is a project for our churches not our legislatures and courts.

Conclusion

The nonviolent life deepens our spirituality. It purges us of the violence that keeps us from enjoying the fullness of life that God intended for us. It brings Satan and the demons into the light. It liberates us. Then we will see Satan falling like lightning from heaven.

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