

May 18—Where the heck is the Devil

We are in a series on God's Amazing Grace. The last couple of weeks I have told you that I do not believe in the doctrine of eternal torment in Hell. The Bible doesn't say that. Jesus didn't say that. My spirit led intuition and my own relationship with God doesn't say that. Hell is a metaphor, a descriptive illustration to point out that the worse thing in this life is to live it estranged from God. To live in fear of death. To never know why you're here on this earth or what its all about? I believe that God will ultimately reconcile and save every person born through his Amazing Grace.

So... if that is true... and there is no threat of hell, why go through the trouble of not sinning? If Jesus does not save us from eternal damnation what does he save us from. If there is no hell, is there also no devil or is the devil just homeless? If everybody is going to heaven why bother preaching the Gospel, inviting someone to church, sending out missionaries?

If the mission is fishin', what are we fishing for?

That gives us a few things to talk about anyway. If any of those questions have come up in your own thinking during this series on Amazing Grace, its good you are here.

Let's talk about the devil to start with. What do you do with the devil and the power of evil in light of God's amazing grace? To say there is no eternal hell, is not to say there is no evil in the world, or that there won't be a final judgment in which every person stands before God and gives an account of some sorts. Jesus taught that, the Apostles taught that, its throughout the scriptures... Casting out evil demons was something Jesus and the boys did all the time. Jesus had a conflict with the devil at the very beginning of his public ministry where he was tempted to go down another path than the one God was calling him to.

The founder of our flavor of Christendom, Martin Luther certainly saw the devil as a supernatural persona as real as the next door neighbor. Throughout his life he wrestles with the devil on a regular basis, talks to him, argues, yells, throws things at him. If you would read any of Luther's writings, granted he was writing from a cultural perspective over 500 years ago, but you would immediately see that he views the Devil as a real, personal, living, tempting force in the world. And it doesn't matter if you are a peasant or a priest, he says, you can expect to be assaulted by the evil one. In his song we just sang, a mighty fortress... he describes this battle with the old satanic foe as an all out war. He wrote, Let this world's tyrant rage, in battle we'll engage...

Today we don't talk much, at least in Lutheran circles, about being possessed by evil demons and exorcisms and spiritual warfare kind of language... but we do recognize evil, the power of temptation, hate, the dark side of life.

There are thousands of men and women right here in Port Orchard who have never read the Bible and don't have the foggiest notion of what it teaches about the devil, or sin or demons, but in their everyday relationships, they live and work and run their lives on the assumption that there is good and evil out there.

That's why the loan officer at the bank checked your credit rating before refinancing your home.

That's why Fred Meyer has one of those alarm systems that detects unscanned merchandise.

That's why many of you women don't walk the streets alone at night.

That's why at this very moment the keys to your car are in your pocket or your purse and not in the ignition in your car.

Our world may not be too theologically trained, but we are theologically conditioned. Many may not have read the Bible, but they have read human nature and are under no illusions about the reality of evil and the presence of a dark side.

The nightly news gives us a consistent parade of ethics scandals by public figures, politicians, business leaders, entertainers, sports figures, religious leaders, you name it... but before we get too judgmental... we could add every person in this room. If we knew all your secret thoughts and actions, and choices, and temptations – put them all up here on the big screen, it would be infinitely more embarrassing than what somebody might say on juicy campus.com. It would be unbearable... life destroying... all your internal private stuff, out there exposed. Forget it.

The truth is we've all tasted that dark side, we've felt it inside of us, we have been tempted, and lied to... we've been mistaken, we've misunderstood God's love, and we have in turn deceived and judged and dominated and acted selfishly toward others. I saw so many pictures of evil at the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem, pictures and descriptions of atrocities in Rwanda that can only be understood as pure evil, Evil in Myanmar where aid workers can't get past local government to bring help, evil at work on 9-11, evil at work in ethnic cleansing... evil in hateful rhetoric out of the middle east. Sometimes there is a part of me that sort of wished there were a real Hell for people like that to go to. But that's why this series is called God's Amazing Grace and not Pastor Allen's amazing grace. God in his unlimited love and desire to save the world would find a way... and when the time was right, Jesus of Nazareth, became that way. And Jesus lived at a time and in a place where the power of evil was alive and well.

How that power of evil has been described and depicted over the course of human history has varied. Some from the Bible some from tradition.

The devil, Satan, chief of demons, Beelzubub, Lucifer, the power of evil, the Serpent, the deceiver, the father of lies, the accuser, the prince of darkness, abaddon, ruler of this age, appolyon, Belial, god of this world, the Red Dragon, wicked one, the enemy, fallen angel, the Beast... For many today the devil is most recognized as a scary red figure with horns, hooved feet, a forked tail and fiery eyes. But as the sophisticated theologians we all are here at First Lutheran, we know the devil doesn't really look like that. It's not literal. It's a way of describing a spiritual reality in which God's reign is diminished or challenged.

Throughout the Bible, our major heroes of the faith keep coming up against this power of the dark side, the evil one, whatever you're favorite term might be.

Abraham, trying to save his own life, pretends his wife Sarah is his sister, and sends her off to the pharaohs harem as a peace offering.

Jacob tricks his dad and steals the birthright from his brother Esau. Their descendants are still fighting in the Middle East over that one.

His boys sell one of their own brothers into slavery cause they were jealous. Strong powerful Samson, killed a thousand Phillistines with the jawbone of a donkey... reduced to milktoast by the tempting allure of Delila.

King David, the great hero of the faith... his lust for Bathsheeba led to the death of her husband and ultimately to David's son as well. Moses tempted to take credit for a miracle, doesn't end up going into the promised land after marching the folks around for 40 years.

Jesus Disciples James and John were tempted with the image of personal power and glory sitting with Jesus on the right and left.

Peter the rock, was tempted by his own fears and survival and denied Jesus not once but three times.

Judas Iscariot set his price at 30 pieces of silver to betray Jesus to the authorities.

Right from the very beginning in the Garden of Eden story. God created the heavens and the earth and declared, it was good.

But by chapter 3, there it is, the power of evil appears as a tempter, a deceiver, and Eve succumbs and then becomes the tempter for Adam who follows suit. They do the exact thing that God had told them not to do. It describes a choice for my will over God's will. My way over Yahweh. They declared their independence... they chose to be separate. A choice God had to give his creation if it is true that God is love.

Why does a woman love her husband... cause he will beat her if she leaves... no, that's not love... that's fear. Why did the girls make their mom a mother's day gift, cause she would punish them if they didn't, no that would be about fear... they did it cause they love her. That's

why God gave us choice, free will, love demands it. But that choice also allowed evil to become a reality in God's creation. If you are going to have real love, there will be the possibility of non-love... the absence of love, hate. If there is going to be the presence of God, there has to be the possibility for the absence of God, if there is light, there will be shadows, darkness. Every positive attribute of God, we have the possibility of choosing otherwise and reaping great misery upon ourselves and other people. Like any loving parent, God has it in his mind what we would be like, how we would grow up, he gave us a model in the person of Jesus of what that life would ultimately look like. It's a path he has laid out in the ten commandments, the law, the sermon on the mount, the parables, the teachings of the apostles. That path is intended to provide you with the best life possible, the most meaningful, the most blessed, the most content, the most abundant. We have not been left in the dark about what being here is all about. God has set a target for us to shoot for. Sin is missing the target. Sin is an old archery term. If you missed the target you sinned. And all you're arrows that were off centered were counted as sins. Sin is missing God's mark as he designed the human experience. The law, as God has revealed it... the path as Jesus lived it and taught it, shows us our need for a savior, because we constantly miss it every day. We constantly make choices that are not loving toward our neighbor, we constantly make choices that don't honor our relationship with God, we constantly make choices that are not in our own best interest, we constantly get side tracked off the path to the abundant life. And those decisions and the decisions of other people constantly bring us face to face with the dark side where God does not reign supreme. And in those places and in those lives where God does not reign, death still has the last word. If you don't know about the reality of God's grace and unconditional love... you're still living with the idea, that you die, and poof your candle goes out. There is nothing more. Death looms large. And that's what Jesus is all about. That's what he came to save us from. Sin and death. The dark side of the human experience. He came to save us from sin. Not from eternal torment in Hell. I mean think about it. If Jesus' main mission was to save us from Hell, he would only be saving us from the penalty, the punishment, and not the real problem... sin itself.

But enough on that for today... that's going to be the whole topic next week. That's where this whole sermon series is going. What does it mean to be saved? What does God's grace actually accomplish now if its not all about the after life and whose getting in and who isn't.

A final thought before I'm done. If everybody is going to heaven, why worry about evangelism. Why preach the Gospel?

First answer... Cause God told us to. Preach the good news to the poor, freedom to the captives, sight to the blind... Matthew 28:19-20 (TEV)

Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples: baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them...

God's greatest desire is to have a relationship with his children... not later some time... but now. And God has asked us to help.

Second answer: It is just too good not to share. Brian called on the phone as soon as all the papers were signed and their adoption was a done deal... it was too good of news not to call and share... They couldn't help it... it was news crying out to be told.

The word Gospel means good news. What a joy to be able to tell people that God is good, and God loves you, and sent his son into the world to show you how much... and he offers you a new life and an eternal life... but if you don't choose wisely, he is ready to send you to Hell where you will burn forever in a fire that never dies. So what do you think? Doesn't he sound great? The word Gospel doesn't mean Good News Bad News... it means good news. God's love and grace is for everybody... period. Death has been eradicated as a factor in the human experience... period. That's what unconditional means... period. No strings attached... period. Get it? Got it. Good.

The third answer is that I care about people. I have discovered through personal experience and in relation with the Christian community, that those on the path of Jesus, are the most happy and blessed and content and non-judgmental, and non-fearful, and the most loved in return, people that I know... and I just want that kind of life for everybody. If I would share a tip with you about a horse I knew was going to run well in the Preakness, why wouldn't I share a tip with you that would transform your life for the better?

Here is a story that describes the difference between an old metaphor for mission and a new one. A guy is sitting in a jail cell... he is on death row... a metaphor for spiritual bondage... darkness. As a Christian person you go to visit that prisoner... but more than that... you bring a gift... a small wrapped box. Inside is a key to the jail cell door. The key represents Jesus. You tell the man in prison that you have a gift for him, you hold the key to his freedom, no strings, if he accepts the gift, opens the box, the key is his and he is free to go. A pretty orthodox way of looking at mission work. We bring Jesus, the key, to those in bondage. Who wouldn't grab a deal like that. But notice how the scenario sets up... Everything depends on you delivering the key... you bring the key, hold the key, control the key, offer the key... and if he refuses to take the gift... withhold the key... and acknowledge his death sentence.

Now let's imagine the scene with the doctrine that everybody is saved. You go to visit the man in his jail cell. Your Christian witness to the Gospel. But instead of all the key stuff... you say... have I got good news for you today. The door you've been staring at, it's unlocked, you're

free to go live the life you've been dreaming about, you're not going die. Come on, I'll buy you lunch.

That's why I do what I do. Its just too good not to share!

4<sup>th</sup> answer as to why you would preach the gospel even if everybody is ultimately getting in... a clip I found that I just loved... and we'll conclude with that.