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“Goblins, Deceivers, and Demons”

2 Thessalonians 2:1-17

Luke 20:27-38

I just want to take a deep breath, and acknowledge that these are two strange scripture texts today. This is one of those mixed blessings of following the lectionary calendar, as Bob and I are trying to do this year; some weeks your choices are four weird texts about the apocalypse. I know my first reaction is just to throw up my hands and say, well, what on *earth* am I going to do with this one?

Six years ago, I was in my third semester of seminary, taking Preaching & Worship 101. We had a group project: put together a chapel service, start to finish, based around one or two texts from the lectionary in our assigned week. Guess which week my group was assigned.

We chose the 2 Thessalonians passage that Katie just read, because all that talk about lawless ones and deceivers and annihilation just rubbed us the wrong way. And there's nothing like a good challenge. We debated and wrestled and pulled this text apart, but nothing came. Finally someone said, this text just makes me want to smash something.

And so, because this was a seminary chapel and not a congregation where people would get upset about such things, one of us got up on a ladder and smashed three blue frosted glass plates on the slate floor of the chapel, while another one of us read the first half of the Thessalonians text in her best fire-and-brimstone-preacher voice. And then I walked in and we yelled a bit more, because before we could get down to the business of finding something hopeful or joyful buried underneath, we had to give voice to some of the hurt and frustration of downright bad theology that has been used to keep people afraid and keep people behaving.

Threats of hellfire and destruction and condemnation of unbelievers just haven't been the most appealing parts of Christian history. In some quarters, the fear poured on by this kind of belief is what motivates people to try and fall in line with the behavior they've been told is acceptable; which just leaves you with a bunch of fearful, repressed people, and an angry, vengeful God. No wonder a lot of folks in my generation are skeptical about this whole church thing. If that were the only picture of God and of Jesus available, I'm not sure I would buy it either.

And yet, these words are there. We don't read 2 Thessalonians very often (it's only three chapters long), but it made it into our sacred scriptures somehow, and for me that means that I have to find some way of reading it, even if reading it does sort of make me want to punch something.

This week, it's paired with this equally odd text from Luke: some Sadducees (who were another group within Judaism at that time, apparently fond of getting into theological arguments with the Pharisees) these Sadducees have cornered Jesus with what is supposed to be a ridiculous question. These seven brothers and one wife are following the Torah law as written (just another example of “Biblical marriage”!) and this theological *reductio ad absurdum* is intended to get Jesus to say something which

would expose the popular belief in resurrection as nothing more than foolish hope.

But of course, Jesus is really good at getting out of trick questions. His response is smart in just the way that the Sadducees would appreciate – using Moses and his logic to look slant-wise at this question – and forcing us to step back and get a little perspective. Of course God’s logic is not our logic, Jesus says. These laws and practices around marriage and society and family, those were meant for a historical people in a historical place (in which a childless widow would have no legal protection unless she remarried) and in God’s realm none of that applies. Those who have a place in God’s kin-dom are equal as children of God, equally alive in God, and equally set free from nitpicky human law about property and inheritance.

But we’re still stuck with this second letter to the Thessalonians. And there are plenty of things we can say about it to try and minimize its weirdness and the discomfort it causes modern readers – it may or may not have been written by the historical person called Paul, the Thessalonian community was probably being exploited by these false teachers the author mentions – but at least for me, that’s not enough. I need to find some glimmer of the divine through these words.

Some people are perfectly happy to write off this letter and others, to see the very human fear and anger in the New Testament, the poetry about genocide and slaughter in the Old Testament, and just say, this is not for me. Not my religion, not my scripture. The God I know doesn’t do that.

And I think that’s pretty valid. The God I know doesn’t talk like that, either.

But humans do. We always have and we always will take the beautiful creation and movement of God in our world and do our very best to break it and corrupt it. We wrap God’s love and salvation in our own hatred and paranoia, and we try to build up walls and entrance exams and poll taxes and photo ID requirements around the realm of God, and then it’s no wonder we have trouble seeing God through all that. The human hands that wrote our scriptures were no different.

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I went to a beautiful memorial service last weekend. She was Marian Delp, and she was a force of nature. She was a beloved mentor of mine, and for those of you who were able to attend my ordination service, she was the woman who presented me with the rainbow stole on Concord’s behalf. She died just before Halloween of complications from her heart problems – and yet it was one of those deaths that carries with it some sense of relief at struggles over, pain finally relieved.

I had known her as strong and vibrant, loving and colorful and always very much herself, wearing bright printed mumuus into her eighties with Birkenstock sandals and rainbow-painted toenails – one who loved unconditionally and generously and always. As I was growing up in church, she accepted me in all my weirdness, and encouraged me in my incessant questioning about faith and life and the world. I did not see until recently how much she also suffered in the midst of that – plagued by loneliness and depression and doubt, especially as she got older and her health began to fail.

Mostly she was stuck at home with these demons, and she clung fast to the church friends who would come to visit and give her rides to worship and to choir practice. But her body worked against her, and the independence she cherished and clung to became more and more difficult. And what is most

inspiring to me is not that she somehow *beat* those things – those constant lying voices that claim to be truth as they chip away at your sense of self – but that she stuck with it. She stood firm against them (even when physically standing got harder and harder), she stood firm in her traditions, the things she knew and the things that were good and life-giving, and she fought those deceitful devils to the end. She prayed every month in church for those with birthdays, even when she had trouble remembering what month it was they were celebrating. She prayed for beloved friends, with a smile and a touch, and a blessing to walk in the light.

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We may not want to call it the work of demons, but that doesn't mean there aren't awful, evil things that still happen. Just because we don't believe the world is teeming with devils doesn't mean the world isn't still an incredibly scary place sometimes. We see things around us that are so obviously contrary to God's vision and plan for our world. And we long, passionately, for a time when those things will be made right. And we catch visions of that potential future sometimes, in beloved communities or spiritual practice or with dear friends and brand new friends – and our hope is restored that this new reality, *God's* reality, God's kin-dom, may truly be possible!

But then someone goes and bombs something, or there's another tragic accident, or a homeowner shoots and kills a teenage girl looking for help. And the vision passes, shattered like glass against the floor, and the present world comes crashing down, and with a cry of anguish or a sigh of resignation we wonder; how long, Lord?

It is no wonder that the early Christians clung tightly to Jesus' promise of a new world at hand – their world was at war, their temple was destroyed, their leaders were being executed along the roadsides. Those who preached that Jesus was coming – soon, any day now – would be immediately popular, promising a new life, a better life, a life without the pain and violence of their present lives. And so Paul writes to these Thessalonians, because they have other voices coming at them, other preachers and so-called prophets and those who might today have a late-night TV show promising miracle cures and divine intervention if you make your donations now.

And he warns them about these false prophets – some claiming to be Paul himself – and yet somehow this warning is also supposed to be comforting. But the words of comfort are words about demons and a “lawless one” and one who usurps the very throne of God. And this is supposed to be reassuring? This is supposed to be an appealing alternative to the idea that Jesus-as-superhero is going to swoop in tomorrow and smite the oppressors and bring a world of eternal peace and justice?

It's not terribly appealing, is it. But neither is life, when we get down to it: we are born into frail human bodies with tender hearts that are broken by the ones we love, and then if we're lucky we age and get sick and die. And all along we are insecure and afraid and sometimes we're jerks to the people we love. These are demons in our lives, and they're not going anywhere anytime soon.

That's life, but life is also so much more than that. Life is also beauty, and hope, and love, and glimpses of the divine. Life is community, always difficult but so often worth every bit of trouble; life is rooted on the earth in our traditions and families, both chosen and by blood; life is being a good creation of God reveling in the midst of the holy creation; life is fleeting wonderful moments that make everything else worth it.

We ground ourselves in God, in good and holy and life-giving things, and we reassure ourselves that the demons *will* come. The scary things are real, and it will probably get worse before it gets better. But, we stand firm in the love of God, and follow in Jesus' path the best we can, holding tight to the ones we love and the traditions that have nurtured us. We imagine God's realm, present but not quite, where human missteps and mistakes are wiped away by the boundless love of God.

We pick up the broken pieces of our own fury and failures and the shards of glass flung at us by demons with many faces, and secure in the hope and love of God, we piece them back together into something new. We catch the glint of light off the pieces scattered around us, and bring our blue pieces together with the orange and red and purple pieces of our beloved friends, and slowly build up something beautiful; a mosaic rainbow in a world of broken glass.

In the words of the apostle, may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Parent, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.

Amen and amen.