

Invasive Grace

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 4:1-13

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My subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil.

- Flannery O'Connor

Jesus goes straight from the waters of his baptism into the wilderness. At baptism, Jesus is reminded that he is called as God's anointed, the Messiah. But what kind of messiah is he going to be? It is in the wilderness, the desert, where everything is stripped away, where Jesus has to hammer out who he is, what he is going to do, and what his reign, his kingdom is going to be like.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell us about this wilderness experience. Matthew and Luke are very similar with Mark being more concise. All three agree Jesus comes directly from his baptism into the wilderness and goes head to head, with the devil, Satan. And it is during those forty days Satan, the Evil One, worked on Jesus pretty hard to get him to lose sight of who he was called to be.

Satan, used three of the greatest temptations for those who want to change this world: economics/money, the ability to provide for people – turning stones to bread, politics – to get the power to make things turn out the way you want them to, and religion – spectacular religion which will make the crowds follow you anywhere.

Jesus resists each temptation. It is not that Jesus is opposed to economics, politics, or religion. In fact, in his ministry, Jesus does talk – often – about economics, the dangers of wealth, and the particular care God has for people in poverty. And Jesus is political; but it is not the politics of Satan, partisan with political party lines drawn trying to seize coercive power. It is the politics of Jesus, a different kind of politics, empowering people from the grassroots up instead of the top down. And certainly, the Jesus Movement is religious but instead of a Broadway production Jesus took a towel and a washbasin and washed feet.

It is significant that all three of the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – tell us the first thing that Jesus does after his baptism is enter into the wilderness and confront the Evil One. It is also interesting that both Mark and Luke tell us that the first miracle Jesus performs when he begins his public ministry after this temptation in the wilderness is that he exorcises demons from a possessed man and it is these very demons who say, “We know who you are, the Holy One of God” (Mark 1:21-28; Luke 4:34). And it was back in the wilderness that Jesus was first called “the Son of God” ... by Satan. Satan and the demons know who Jesus is, even if everyone else is clueless.

Flannery O’Connor referred to the Devil, “not as some generalized evil, but an evil intelligence” determined to defeat the purposes of God (*Habit of Being*, letter Nov. 20, 1959). It is important that we understand the world of the New Testament and what it is trying to say to us: this story of salvation, redemption, and the New Creation of God is about God and us, but it is also about a third power, variously referred to as the Enemy, Evil, Satan, the Devil, the demonic, Lucifer, the great Antagonist, or the Confuser. The Apostle Paul does not use the name Satan but instead speaks of the Principalities and Powers, as you’ve heard me say

before, which are the spirit of systems of domination. Systems have a spiritual aspect to them just like an individual person does. And Paul assumes that these systems, though originally created by God for good and order and peace in this world, have rebelled against God, and seek their own enhancement and dominion. Paul speaks of Sin and Death and the Law, which are contrary to God. For Paul, the Law, for example, was given by God in the Old Testament to help us know God and live God's Way. But in rebellion and Sin the Law became twisted and abused into something that was the very opposite of God's intention. More, we are captive to these Powers of Sin and Death. We are enslaved within this realm of darkness.

This is why we do not categorize people as evil though we might talk about someone caught in evil. At the same time, we hold people accountable, including ourselves for our sin, for our actions. It is why we confess our sin and seek forgiveness and why we are humble. In Flannery O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood*, Hazel Motes says, "If I was in sin I was in it before I ever committed any." In other words, sin and death is something we're in before we do individual sins.

Furthermore, the New Testament and Christian theology over the centuries believes in the concept of Hell, Gehenna, or Sheol, not simply as a place "down there" but as a domain, a realm, where evil has become the reigning reality – an empire of death, as Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444 CE) called it. The Bible speaks of Egypt or slavery, bondage, Pharaoh, or Babylon, or the Empire, the place of Darkness, kingdoms of evil. These are various names and images but all are pointing to the reality that there are places and times where Death and Evil reign supreme, where there is an utter absence of good (*privatio boni*).

No matter what else you might have heard about hell, its essence is the utter and complete absence of God. Hell is where there is no God. From what you've heard, hell might be a place of torment and torture. Perhaps it is a lake of fire or maybe a sheet of ice where nothing can move, where there is neither growth, nor change nor hope of change. But whatever else it is, hell is the place of total alienation from God. God is not there.

The novelist Robertson Davies said, "There's no reason why hell should not have, so to speak, visible branch establishments throughout the earth, and I have visited quite a few of them." We know about or have seen those places where it seems God is absent, where there is no good – hell on earth.

As a high school student I remember visiting Dachau, near Munich, one of the Nazis' largest death camps. Though I was fairly well read for a teenager in history and World War II and the Holocaust, I was not prepared for such a place. How could I have been? It was a place where the intent was deliberately, purposefully, and systematically to eliminate goodness. Not only extermination but the thorough and radical negation of the humanity of thousands of people. I remember clearly that I was unable to talk about it for a while after visiting Dachau. I was in shock. For the first time, in my 17-year-old white middle-class American life, I caught a glimpse of true evil.

Later, that year, I read Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, where the narrator is going up the river in search of the mysterious Mr. Kurtz. As the riverboat penetrates ever deeper into the interior, the narrator describes his sense of evil as "the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention.

It looked at you with a vengeful aspect” (emphasis mine). When I read that, I remember thinking of Dachau.

Dachau, Auschwitz, Treblinka, or genocide in Bosnia or Rwanda, and on and on: the worldwide, even cosmic scope and malignant power of evil, both on an individual level and on a systemic or corporate level, calls us to speak of a power far more monstrous than the mere sum of individual people doing bad things. There is much more going on here. You can call it what you want but the Bible gives it the name Satan, the great Antagonist, the Evil One, and the empire of death and darkness, hell is where he is in charge.

And that is where Jesus went when he came up out of the waters of baptism. Jesus walked straight into the heart of darkness. He invaded the empire of death.

Indeed, this is the story of Jesus and the Incarnation. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Christ Jesus first invaded the realm of Sin and Death. That’s why Herod was so intent in killing him. It was not simply a matter of a crazy, maniacal king – though it was that it was more than that. Choirs around the world sing during Christmas, Benjamin Britten’s *Ceremony of Carols*, “This little babe, but two days old,/ Is come to rifle Satan’s fold.” Satan and the powers of Death knew what was going on.

The empire of death enslaves us all and demeans us, diminishes us, divides us against each other, and destroys us. It demeans and destroys all God’s creation. From cancer to climate change, war to famine, racism and bigotry, hatred and fear – all and more are both instruments of Sin, Death, and Evil and the results from them. Day after day we are worn down and we struggle to not give up or give in.

And no matter how much we strive, we do not have the power to set ourselves free from this empire of death.

We need one from outside us, greater than us, to come and rifle Satan's fold, to set us free, heal this planet, and give us hope. As W.H. Auden famously said, "Nothing can save us that is possible: We who die demand a miracle" (*For the Time Being*). The miracle is that the grace of God in Jesus Christ has invaded this deathly realm and has broken the shackles of our enslavement. He brings good news to the poor, proclaims release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and the freedom of the oppressed (Luke 4:18).

At Caesarea Philippi the disciple Simon Peter confessed that he believed that Jesus was the Messiah of God. Jesus said, "I'm calling you Peter, the Rock, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). Satan's empire of death, surrounded by walls cannot withstand Christ and Christ's church in love and grace. Furthermore, the walls we build, imitations of the very walls of hell that Satan builds, cannot stop the invasive power of grace and love of Christ. And those walls go right down the middle of each and every one of our hearts. Only by the invasive grace of God can those walls be broken.

Jesus goes head to head with Satan, invades his territory. Luke says at the end of today's story, Satan retreated until an opportune time. For the rest of his ministry, Jesus pursues the Evil One and the Evil One looks for every chance to trap Jesus, and tempt Jesus to become someone else. But every time Jesus brings healing and wholeness, feeds the hungry, or gives hope, he breaks the chains of Death's enslavement. When he picked up the little children and called them to him,

he was pushing back the darkness and bringing light and love, grace and joy. Every time he stooped down to listen to a child, he was breaking a chain. Every time he lifted a despairing person, he broke a shackle.

Finally, Satan musters his dominion and throws everything he has at Jesus, killing him on the cross. Jesus receives and absorbs and breaks the worst Evil can do. In dying on the cross he defeats Death. In three days he was resurrected and sent back to the battle, vindicated and victorious, he calls us to follow him.

We do not take up arms or carry guns or use any kind of coercion. Instead, like Jesus we immerse ourselves in prayer and the Bible. We immerse ourselves every day in the living Word of God – Jesus Christ.

Hear the great lay theologian William Stringfellow, *“In the face of death, live humanly. In the middle of chaos, celebrate the Word. Amidst Babel, speak the truth. Confront the noise and verbiage and falsehood of death with the truth and potency and efficacy of the Word of God. Know the Word, teach the Word, nurture the Word, preach the Word, define the Word, incarnate the Word, do the Word, live the Word. And more than that, in the Word of God, expose death and all death's works and wiles, rebuke lies, cast out demons, exorcise, cleanse the possessed, raise those who are dead in mind and conscience”* (from *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*).

Christiaan Beker was one of the premier New Testament theologians of recent times. He was the major professor at Princeton of my good friend Larry Bethune. Professor Beker, a native of the Netherlands, was known the “crazy Dutchman.” In 1943 when he was a smart, sensitive, emotionally vulnerable

teenager in Holland, the Nazis wrenched him away from his family and shipped him, alone, to a slave labor camp in Berlin. There he contracted typhus and nearly died. Beside him in the camp infirmary lay a Polish boy who had been beaten senseless by Nazi guards. The boy lay beside Beker for three days and nights and then died. With the wasted body of a Polish boy beside him murdered for no reason, Beker looked out the window at Berlin in flames from the Allied bombardment. There, “sick with typhus and viewing the apocalypse, Beker confessed, ‘Only God is real.’” It was then and there Beker committed himself to become a theologian of the gospel.

Professor Beker could be offensive while at the same time he was an inspirational biblical interpreter. He was bi-polar, wildly impulsive, probably suffered from what we now know as PTSD, and tended to cut himself off from those who loved him the most. His whole life was an apocalyptic battlefield. He fought sin and death out there and he fought it in his own heart. His theme in spite of everything was the ultimate victory of God in Jesus Christ over every form of evil. He was about hope (see Ben C. Ollenburger, “*Suffering and Hope: The Story Behind the Book,*” *Theology Today*, Oct. 1987, pp. 350-359).

So Austin Heights, we are about hope. We do not give up and we do not give in. Though we often feel closed in upon, feel as if we are on the defensive, and feeling like we’re hanging on by our fingernails, remember, it is Evil and Death that is on the defensive. The very gates of hell cannot stand against the church of Jesus Christ. Our job is to immerse ourselves in Christ and then go out that door with the banners of the cross flying.

Descending from the Kingdom of Light and Life, invading the darkness of

the kingdom of Death and plundering it, comes One “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty” (Rev. 1:8). He says to Death, “Death thou shalt die.”

He is the Alpha and the Omega, the Lamb that is worthy, the root and the offspring of David, the bright and morning star, risen with healing in his wings; Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.