



From the Pulpit: September 18, 2022
The Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time—Family Festival

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Job 1:6–2:8

The Wizard of Uz, III: Satan

This Autumn at Kenilworth Union Church we're preaching a sermon series called "The Wizard of Uz" about the book of Job from the Hebrew Bible.

One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and the accuser also came among them. The Lord said to the accuser, "Where have you come from?" The accuser answered the Lord, "From going to and fro on the earth and from walking up and down on it." The Lord said to the accuser, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil." Then the accuser answered the Lord, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." The Lord said to the acuser, "Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!" So the accuser went out from the presence of the Lord.

Well you know the rest of this story. With God's sketchy permission, The Satan takes both Job's livelihood, then his precious children, and finally even his health. Still he persists on saying "*The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.*"

Does anybody believe in Satan anymore? Well actually yes. The IRS does. The Internal Revenue Service, that ultimate credentialing agency, recognizes the First Church of Satan, San Francisco, as a legal tax-deductible religious institution.

"The Satan says,
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Here you can't even get your local IRS agent to believe in your 42-foot yacht as a business expense, but Satan, **that** he's willing to believe in. Today only the IRS believes in Satan right?

By the way did you notice that 'Satan' is an anagram of 'Santa'? Then too 'Britney Spears' is an anagram of 'Presbyterians'.

Perhaps the figure of Satan is an obsolete myth to be discarded to the scrap heap of silly religion. On the other hand, in the last 70 years we have come to know Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Putin, and holocausts at Auschwitz, Siberia, Nagasaki, and Ukraine, so it is a bit ironic

that after perhaps the most satanic century of them all, we have ceased to believe in Satan.

What if Baudelaire was right when he said that "the devil's cleverest trick is to convince us that he does not exist"?¹¹

¹ Quoted by Alan Tremmel, *Dark Side: The Satan Story* (St. Louis: CBD Press, 1987), p. 150.

If you don't believe in a literal, personal, objective Satan, don't tune me out just yet. One theologian called the figure of Satan the "symbolic repository of the whole complex of evil existing in the present world order," the "collective shadow" of evil.² That's what I believe. Not horns and a pitchfork, but something dark and sinister in the cosmos and in history, that sabotages human thriving.

Satan is not nearly as important to the Bible as the TV preachers pretend. He makes only three appearances in the 39 long books of the Hebrew Bible. And no Satan does not appear in the Garden of Eden; that is simply the Serpent.

But he plays a very important role here in the book of Job. "One day," says this author "one day the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came with them." What we have here is a committee meeting of the heavenly council of God's advisors in which they report to him how things are going in the realm. Satan is described here as of all things, one of the sons of God.

Satan does not have a name here, but a title. It is not "Satan," but "The Satan." It's a title which only much later becomes a common name, in much the same way that Jesus **The** Christ becomes Jesus Christ. "The Satan" means simply "The Accuser." Satan in the book of Job was God's prosecuting attorney.

Like a District Attorney, Satan's job is to search for, reveal, and prosecute the guilty.

When God asks Satan what he's been up to, Satan says ominously, "From going to and fro on the earth, and walking up and down in it." I hope you'll notice that the author of Job portrays The Satan as a personality of wit and intelligence. His phrases are shapely and poetic, and when he speaks, God listens hard.

The Satan is looking for trouble at God's behest. The Satan is one of God's spies, a kind of FBI agent keeping a secret eye on things. And Satan is keeping his on Job. Satan says to God, "Well no wonder! No wonder Job's so good. He drives a Range Rover. He has more money than Bill Gates. *Of course* he's going to be righteous and blameless. But God the really interesting question is this: Will Job serve God for nought? Does Job serve

God because God is *God*, or does Job serve God because *there's something in it for Job*?

The Satan says, I'll make a friendly little wager with you, supreme deity. I'll bet that if you take away everything he has, he'll run so fast in the other direction it'll make your head spin."

The Satan you see, is suspicious of mercenary faith, faith which expects to be recompensed for its effort. And The Satan is willing to bet his reputation that Job's faith is mercenary and self-serving.

A while back, I was channel-surfing the other day and came across that classic film *Trading Places*. You remember this 1983 film with Eddie Murphy and Dan Ackroyd?

Trading Places is actually a fairly sophisticated retelling of the first two chapters of Job. Wall Street tycoons Randolph and Mortimer Duke, like two heavenly beings in the divine council, make a friendly little wager—one dollar, to be exact—that if you take away all the advantages of their young protégé Louis Winthorpe III (Dan Ackroyd), Louis Winthorpe III will turn into a bum and a felon, and likewise, if you hand over all those advantages to a street bum like Billy Ray Valentine (Eddie Murphy), he in turn will become an accomplished investment banker on Wall Street. Hilarity and chaos ensue. Randolph and Mortimer Duke are like two divine beings playing poker with the life of a weaker, helpless protégé like Louis Winthorpe III, or like Job.

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So I have to be honest with you: I'm not so sure about this archaic, primitive little story. But let me capture at least this truth from the story. There is at least this—The Satan is not God's *Nemesis* but God's *Servant*. Satan can do *nothing* apart from God. He has no power and no freedom of his own. The evil which befalls Job is neither **from** God nor **apart from** God.

That is the essential truth we must hear from this story. God does not *will* Job's calamity, but God does *permit* it. God gives some latitude to the dark spirit the Bible sometimes calls The Satan. Martin Luther used to talk about "God's Satan."⁴ God's Satan. Satan belongs to God.

Later in Judeo-Christian thought, after the New Testament was put together, Satan becomes much more, more than God's servant. He becomes God's enemy, or sometimes God's partner, or sometimes God's left hand. The New Testament appears to have inherited this understanding of a strong Satan from a Persian religion called Zoroastrianism, in which the world is ruled by twin Gods—an evil twin and a good twin, a benevolent deity who creates sunsets and puppies, and a sinister divinity who masterminds mosquitoes, lime disease, and Vladimir Putin.

The modern version of this mythology is *Star Wars*, where the Force has its light and its dark side—Obi Wan Kenobi and Darth Vader. The Jedi access the Light Side of The Force, and the Sith access the Dark Side, but both are supplicants to a single Force. THE Force. In the fantasy world of George Lucas, The Force is composed of twin deities, Light and Dark, but for many of us George Lucas' world is much more than fantasy; it is our operative theology.

We need an alternative to *Star Wars* theology, because *Star Wars* grants the Dark Side too much. Satan as God's enemy or God's partner gives Satan too much credit. He's not as important as he thinks he is, not as important as **we** think he is, IF he exists at all.

It's a strange world we live in. I went back to watch the film version of William Styron's novel *Sophie's Choice*—

do you remember?—about a Polish woman, Sophie, thrown into Auschwitz for less than nothing at all. She gets off the train in the concentration camp and meets an incarnation of the Satanic will if ever there was one—an SS doctor who decides who will go to the labor camps and who to the crematorium. He says to her, "You may keep one of your children. You must choose." She chooses her son. Her daughter is carried off to the furnaces. That kind of evil is terrestrially inexplicable. At least symbolically, there is something behind this world casting dark shadows upon innocent human beings.

Surviving the war, Sophie finds some peace and hope in the arms of Nathan, a paranoid schizophrenic with his own demons to fight, but finally together they decide that this world

is too satanic to live in, and they take their lives. The film reminds us that the world is a place of almost incalculable and irrational evil, so irrational that it cannot be *thought* but only *symbolized* under the person of the Satan.

But even here the narrator of *Sophie's Choice* places an overlay of meaning on this horrifying story. Standing there on the Brooklyn Bridge, Stingo the Narrator says, "And thus ended my voyage of discovery in a place as strange as Brooklyn. I let go the rage and sorrow for Nathan and Sophie, and for the many others who were but a few of the butchered and betrayed and martyred children of the earth. And when I could finally see again, I saw the first rays of daylight reflected in the murky river. This was not Judgement Day. This was only morning. Morning excellent and fair."

*Ample make this bed.
Make this bed with awe;
In it wait till judgment break
Excellent and fair.*

*Be its mattress straight,
Be its pillow round;
Let no sunrise' yellow noise
Interrupt this ground.²*

² Emily Dickinson, #829.

"It's a strange world. But it's God's world. And God is love."

It's a strange world. But it's God's world. And God is love. And morning shall break. Or as the Proprietor of The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel puts it, "In India, we have a saying: Everything will be all right in the end, so if it is not all right, it is not the end." The End.

—The Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

Spirit of the living God, mighty God, prince of peace, we long for you. We gather here under the safe canopy of this Sanctuary to seek your presence and know the peace of your spirit. Be with us now as we pray. Hold our hopes and dreams, our worries and fears, and receive us just as we are.

Do not let our faith be milquetoast and timid, but instead wrap us up in deepest trust so that we might know complete release, letting go of the burdens we carry, and beginning anew in this moment with your spirit as our guide. When we are stuck in perfectionism, lead us toward acceptance of ourselves; empower us to know that your deep river of peace flows just below the surface and under your safekeeping, a gentleness and strength draws near.

Place a song within us, let a song rise from our collective voices, so that we might feel united in your presence, united with those of every time and place, the ones alongside us in the pew today, and those who have sat by our side in other decades and who are now beyond the veil, and yet still part of our circle of wisdom and trust. We need the community of saints, the community that extends far beyond us, for this world is full of challenge, and you call us to rise up, called and made holy in the task of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, justice, and humility.

You call us to speak the truth when there is injustice and corruption. You call us to defend and care for the least, the lonely, and the lost in our midst. You call us to stand against all that diminishes freedom. For places of war, O God, make your peace a possibility. For places of violence, make tender the hearts of those who can interrupt and cut it short. For the places of grief and unending heartache, place true companions' side by side, so that we might be balm for one another.

Be with us, O God, O Christ, O light beyond light, and hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus teaches us. Our Father....Amen.

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