

*The same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.
For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.*

The Rev. Fanny Belanger
Sunday, February 14
1st Sunday of Lent

So I am currently reading this disturbing book
Mission at Nuremberg by Tim Townsend
Where he tells the story of Henry Gerecke, an American parish priest
who became
chaplain for the Nazis during their trials in Germany.

Psalm 91:1-2,9-16
Romans 10:8b-13
Luke 4:1-13

I did not know there was a chaplain for the Nazis.
Actually, I did not even know there was a God for the Nazis.

But as I went on with the reading I learned that
at Nuremberg, in between sessions,
Albert Speer, Hitler's architect, received holy communion,
Hans Frank, Hitler's lawyer, was baptized,
Wilhem Keitel, Supreme commander of Armed forces, prayed on his knees and wept bitterly as he
begged Christ for forgiveness of his many sins.

As far as we can know the human heart,
some of these men truly repented.
And as far as we trust the Scriptures,
they were forgiven.
As they were sentenced to death,
they must have known what it means to have to rely
on God's grace only,
to come before God empty handed
with nothing to say for your defense.

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved
What kind of God is our God?

Well, when the Rev. Henry Gerecke was asked by the military
to go and minister for the Nazis
- in order that Geneva requirements were observed -
He sat down under a tree
prayed harder than he ever had, says the story,
and he decided to believe that
the Nazis were people
and more than that, that they still had a chance to become God's children.

Oh, he wasn't stupid, he knew who he would have to deal with.
He had spent years in hospitals ministering to American soldiers during the war
He had spent days visiting concentration camps after the liberation.
The war was over and he was free to go home to his wife and children
or he could go to Nuremberg to answer the call.
He did go.
Because he believed
truly believed in his heart that nobody, no-one, is beyond God's mercy.
What kind of God is our God?

See, I guess the way we usually read the Gospel we have just heard today
is
half amused, half embarrassed.
Jesus talking with the devil
and making the devil go away...
Oh well, that's just a story, isn't it?
Maybe we start brainstorming to make sense of it,
what does it stand for, what does it mean, what is the metaphor?
Well, to my understanding, there is no image, no underlying wisdom,
nothing to figure out that isn't figured out already:
Jesus defeats evil
that's all.
Jesus truly overcomes evil
and makes it go away.
That's the whole program, you see.
Jesus has been baptized and the Spirit of God leads him into the desert to meet with the devil
because this is what his ministry is going to be all about:

*It's not about teaching the right doctrine
it's not about doing miracles.
It's not even about being nice to people
It's about defeating evil.*

In the whole Gospel Jesus encounters demons and defeats them until the last struggle on the cross.

The thing is
we often confuse bad things, hurtful things, terrible things with evil things
which makes
Jesus's victory over evil impossible to grasp.
After World War II,
there a whole school of philosophy and theology raised and asked the question
Is it still possible to believe that there is a God?
Because God was so obviously defeated by the Nazis, by the concentration camps.
How could a believer pray or even hear the words of our today's psalm:
*The Lord God shall give his angels charge over you to keep you in all your ways
they shall bear you in their hands, lest you dash your foot against a stone?*
Well. Jesus himself will know
what it is to be surrounded by hate
To be laughed at, to be humiliated, to be tortured, to be slaughtered
and yet, he trusted the psalm.
He trusted God could still be powerful in the midst of his martyr,
God could still defeat evil
and make his glory shines in the worst nightmare you can think about.
Jesus believed that even if terrible things happened to him,
he could still be safe from evil
even if there was no magic at all to preserve him from the hands of his enemies.

Gerecke the chaplain believed it too.

In spite of all the evil in the world we can still remain innocent, or become innocent again,
we can still be God's children.

I know it's hard in our culture today
in spite of all the evidences
to truly believe that there is evil to fight in this world.
We believe evil is nothing, the lack of good
we should just ignore it
But the Gospel teaches us that evil is something we have to resist
and to fight against.

One of my professor at the seminary used to say
maybe we don't believe evil is real but
if it is something you have to resist, then it's real.

But do we resist?
Do I resist?

Oh in the abundance of everyday life, I guess that, contrarily to Jesus, I don't have much to resist:
I am not tempted by bread, I have enough to eat.
I am not tempted by power, I am free to lead my own life already.
I am not tempted to think God has forsaken me, I feel blessed enough.
But of course, I am not in the desert.
It's only when we find ourselves in the desert,
sickness, unemployment, broken relationships, death of a loved one,
that we start to feel forsaken, confuse and lost
and suddenly we experience that evil is real.

Evil is not nothing
But evil is not necessarily the terrible things that happen to us either.
Evil is what makes us think we are nothing, that there is no God and that life has no meaning.
That there is nothing to look forward to.

Evil is what kills hope, faith and joy and evil is what tries to destroy the child of God inside of us.
Evil is what makes us believe we are not worthy
and so the way evil exercises its power is always the same,
It is what tells us:
You're not good, you're bad already
You're bad already so just go on doing the things you do.
That's the way they proceeded in Youth for Hitler,
that's the way they proceed in gangs
that's the way child abusers proceed:
They make you do something wrong
and then you just go on with what you do because you're bad already, dirty already, not worthy already.

In one of her books, *The Storyteller*, Jodi Picoult imagines a Nazi remembering his childhood
and how as a young man he was "forced" into beating up his little brother in a contest.
This is what he says:

*That day was the hardest because I could have said no.
Every time after that, it became easier, because if I did not do it again, I would be reminded of that first
time I did not say no. Repeat the same action over and over again, and eventually it feels right.
Eventually, there isn't even any guilt.*

You do something, something little, something wrong
you lie a little, you cheat a little, you steal a little,
and then you go on with doing it, again and again
because it's done already, so it does not matter anymore, right?
We think the devil is stupid, well
the devil is very smart, you see.

In our story, the devil meets Jesus for the first time and so he tries to figure out who is Jesus.
Jesus is fasting, he must be hungry.
Oh, no, he is not interested by food?
Power, maybe?
But when Jesus declines worldly goods and honors and quotes the Scriptures for the second time,
the devil gets it:
Jesus is a man of God
so the devil quotes back the Scriptures to Jesus and challenges him to try God.
Oh no, the devil is not going to tempt us with things we're not interested in.
The devil can even tempt us with the love of God.
When we are in the desert, when terrible things happen to us,
that's the time the devil attacks to make us turn our backs on God.
And he surely meets us wherever our inner desert is.
I tell you, we cannot outsmart him.

But it's never too late to say no.

And today Jesus shows us how to say no.
Jesus says no to the devil because he truly believes he is better than this.
He does not need bread so badly, he has God's word.
He does not to be assured of his own power, he believes in God's sovereignty.
He does not need to test God, he knows for sure he is loved.
Jesus has the perfect blend of self-esteem and humility.
We are not all powerful in the face of temptation and evil
- our world seems so often to be defeated by evil -
But we have the freedom to say no.
We have the freedom to believe.

The good news is that the Spirit is always with us.
Actually, our text is framed by the presence of the Spirit.
Verse 2 it reads that the Spirit is leading Jesus
and verse 14 (we miss it in our reading) it reads
Jesus armed with the power of the Spirit returns to Galilee.
Leads him to the desert, and brings him back again.
God resists evil within us
God fights with us, not with the arms of evil, but as a warrior of trust and hope and compassion.
We always have the power to call the name of the Lord.

What kind of God is our God?

A question that is disturbing, a question that is worth pondering.
May we ask God during this Lent that our experiences of the desert will lead us to a better knowledge
of his love and of his faithfulness. Amen.