

## Welcome

Can we talk about exorcising the devil today? (It's going to get weird, but not in the way you think.)

Last summer, self-proclaimed Neo-Nazis staged a march in Charlottesville, WV. It was a watershed moment for many white Americans. For some reason, the fact that in 2017, hundreds of torch-bearing Neo Nazis could assemble and march was the proof that finally convinced many of us of what our fellow citizens of color had been saying for generations: America has never solved our race problem.

But the reality was that, though many of us were finally ready to admit we had a serious problem, no one seemed to know what to do about it. The evil of systemic racism just seemed too big, and there were so many opinions - everything from 'burn it all down and start over' to 'maybe just go back to ignoring it and hope it will go away'.

The reaction to Charlottesville followed the same pattern as pretty much every other major conflict in recent memory, from school shootings to what to do about the Dreamers to even what news sources are trustworthy. A few of us write major opinion pieces (or find one we like) and share it on social media, sparking a war of words waged in the comments following. The rest of us just sort of step away from social media for a few days and watch cat videos until the hubbub dies down.

Because, deep down, we're all painfully aware that we as individuals aren't actually going to *do* much of anything to solve these problems. Even if our opinion on this particular issue is 100% right (and let's be real: which of us can honestly claim that?!), we're not presidents, congress persons or even state reps. We're regular, everyday people without much influence outside our immediate circles.

And these evils seem so overwhelming, so big, so impossible they're the one place we're willing to say are "demonic". Even for the more skeptical among us, it's not hard to believe there's something insidious behind school shootings, racial oppression and our general sense of insecurity. It would explain our feeling of powerlessness, our sense of being small cogs in a big machine that's bent on doing us harm.

Today, we're going to explore the Satanic roots of big, systemic evil. And more importantly, we're going to see how this Satanic evil has been cast out, how it's being cast out today and how we can cast it out wherever we find it.

Today, we'll see that God's way to defeat the big evils in the world is through small acts of faithful sacrifice. Which is good, because while none of us can tackle the big evils, we can all choose to be faithful and act sacrificially in small ways every day. We can all be a community that pushes back the darkness, that casts out evil.

## Message

We're in the season of Lent, when the Church gets serious about preparing ourselves to the work God calls us to in the world. We prepare by fasting, praying and practicing generosity - these practices help us to identify sin in our lives so we can repent of it and turn to God for healing and restoration.

Our Lent series this year is called The Devil in the Details. We're reading stories of Jesus' journey toward the cross, stories in which - more often than not - the Devil shows up. Reading these texts helps us to find the everyday ways we are distracted from God's calling.

Turn with me to John 12. Throughout this series, we've been looking at the small sins, the everyday ways we are distracted from God. But today, as we approach the end of Lent, we're focusing on the big evils in the world. For Jesus, there was no question that the world was under the sway of demonic forces. Speaking to his disciples, Jesus warned:

Then Jesus told them, "The time for judging this world has come, when Satan, the ruler of this world, will be cast out. And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself."

He said this to indicate how he was going to die. -- John 12:30-33

Jesus promised that the "time for judging the world has come", and that when this judgment happens, the ruler of this world, Satan, will be "cast out" (which is the Greek word used for exorcism). And lest we be confused as to what Jesus is referencing, John tells us that he is specifically referencing his death.

The Crucifixion is an exorcism.

Jesus' death is the means by which the 'ruler of this world' is cast out.

One other important note: when John uses the term 'world' in his Gospel, he isn't referencing the physical world, what we might call 'creation' or the 'earth'. He's using 'world' as a metaphor for the big systems of human culture. Some scholars like to translate it as "the System". If you're a Rage Against the Machine fan, then think of John's use of 'the world' as the Machine against which Zach, Tom and the rest of the guys are raging.

Jesus has come to save the world, the System. How? By dying.

But Jesus' death isn't just a one-time cure-all. That becomes clear if we back up and read the larger context. Go back to verse 20 with me. This speech comes during the Passion week, the week that will end with Jesus' death. And this particular note is triggered by the arrival of some foreigners:

Some Greeks who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration paid a visit to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee. They said, "Sir, we want to meet Jesus." Philip told Andrew about it, and they went together to ask Jesus.

It's not unusual that Greeks would come to Israel for Passover. It's not unlike how today people like to go to New Orleans for Mardi Gras, Germany for Oktoberfest or Spain for the Running of the Bulls. Passover was Israel's highest holy day, and it attracted pilgrims from all over the known world.

Jesus understood these Greeks to be the fulfillment of a prophecy that God's glory would be revealed to the whole world. That these Greeks would bear witness to his death meant that the report of what happened would spread far outside Jerusalem, far outside Israel.

So because these Greeks come to meet him, Jesus gives this speech:

Jesus replied, “Now the time has come for the Son of Man to enter into his glory. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat is planted in the soil and dies, it remains alone. But its death will produce many new kernels—a plentiful harvest of new lives.

Again, we see themes we've seen throughout this series: that the Cross is the moment of God's glory. It's the act that will make God famous in the nations - a massive irony for all those living under the shadow of Rome, since the Cross was a sign of shame and curse. Yet this is the act of God that will make God famous among the Greeks, the Romans and the rest of the world. This is the act by which all those Greeks and Romans and everyone else will be freed of the Satanic influence in all the world's systems. This is how the demonic ghosts will be purged from the machine.

Jesus compares himself to a seed: a small thing of no worth, barely noticeable. And yet if the seed is allowed to "die" in the earth, it produces many times more fruit than it was by itself.

And then Jesus makes the flip: his death is not a one-time thing he will undertake, but a pattern he is establishing for everyone who comes after him to follow.

Those who love their life in this world will lose it. Those who care nothing for their life in this world will keep it for eternity. Anyone who wants to serve me must follow me, because my servants must be where I am. And the Father will honor anyone who serves me...

He insists that anyone who loves their lives will lose them. As Jesus promises: this is how we cast out Satan:

Then Jesus told them, “The time for judging this world has come, when Satan, the ruler of this world, will be cast out. And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself.”

He said this to indicate how he was going to die. -- John 12:20-26, 30-33

It seems impossible that acts of sacrifice can overcome the evil of the world, yet that has been God's plan from the beginning. God came to a wandering nomad named Abraham and told him, "Leave your

home country, follow me and I will make you into a great nation." So Abraham left everything he knew - he gave up his psyche - and followed God.

Several generations later, Abraham's descendants were a large nation, but not great. They were slaves. God raised up Moses, who had to abandon both his life in the royal courts and then later his life of comfortable anonymity to follow God's call.

It's the story of David, who marched against a giant. David wore no armor, carried no sword or spear, but took only a sling, a stone, and his faith in a God who was bigger than any giant.

It's the story of Mary, a young, unwed girl who was told God had chosen her to bear the Messiah. Mary who, knowing full well the judgment, grief and trauma that would come her way, responded with, "Let it be as the Lord says."

And of course it's the story of Jesus, the God who became a helpless baby, born into poverty, in a backwater corner of the globe. Jesus who lived a life largely in anonymity, who only spent perhaps the last 3 years of his life teaching and healing. Jesus who gave himself willing over to the most shameful death imaginable, praying "Not my will, but yours."

But it didn't stop with Jesus. After he was raised, he trusted the preaching of his resurrection to the women who didn't give up on him - a foolish move in a world where women's testimony was disregarded. Yet these women became the first evangelists, telling even Jesus' disciples the good news of his resurrection.

That same story played out in the 250s, when Rome was struck by a terrible plague - 5,000 people were dying every day at the height of it. As the nobility abandoned the city, fleeing the deadly plague, it was the followers of Jesus who stayed, caring for the sick, risking their own lives - at a time when it was still illegal to be a Christian in Rome.

It's the story of Chiune Siguhare, the Japanese ambassador to Lithuania during WWII, who worked days without sleep issuing travel visas to Jews trying to escape the Nazis, who was issuing visas out the window of his train even as the Japanese government evacuated him. Who was disgraced for his actions when he returned home and ended his life as a door-to-door lightbulb salesman.

It's the story of the Albanian nun Anjeze Gonxhe Bojaxhiu, who knew God called her to serve the poorest in the world and so moved to the slums of Calcutta, India, to work with victims of terrible diseases, who became known across the world as a living symbol of God's love for us. Who said, "**No one can do great things. But everyone can do small things with great love.**" (She's better known by the name she took after she became a nun - Mother Theresa).

It's the story of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who - along with the many other heroes of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s - committed to resisting the satanic evils of institutional racism non-violently.

Dr. King said of his oppressors, "Let them get their dogs and let them get their hose and we will leave them standing before their God and the world spattered with the blood and reeking with the stench of their Negro brothers. It is necessary to bring these issues to the surface, to bring them out into the open where everybody can see them."

Small acts: caring for the sick, showing up and insisting on being seen. Using your job or position for good. These are things we can all do.

After Charlottesville, like a lot of folks, I wanted to do something. The fact that I didn't have any idea what to do was a major clue, so I reached out to some other friends who felt similarly and we started meeting once a month to read and discuss books on the complicated issue of race in America. We've been meeting for a little over six months and are reading our third book. We're beginning to understand some of the intricacies of the evil that is systemic racism, and more importantly, beginning to see what small steps we can take to make a difference, to work for justice, to be part of healing.

A book club isn't much. It sounds like a particularly silly solution to the overwhelming problem of systemic racial injustice. And but all evil is resisted in these small, everyday ways. With small acts of sacrifice.

That's why here at Catalyst, every box we pack at Life Message matters. Every meal we share with another who is sick or suffering matters. Every moment we spend in the nursing home, honoring our elders, matters. Every minute spent in serving our kids matters. Every smile, handshake, pot of coffee matters. Every note played in practice or worship matters. All these small acts of sacrifice matter because they are the way by which evil is overcome. They are our form of exorcism, where we cast out the devil by the power of Jesus' death and resurrection.

### **Communion + Examen**

We approach the Cross as an act of faith, trusting that it is God's power, not ours that casts out the Devil.

### **Assignment + Blessing**

The big evils of the world seem too big to overcome. We overcome them by the power of Jesus, by imitating his sacrifice.

What's one small thing you can do with great love this week?