

4th Sun. Ord. Time (B)
St. Athanasius and St. Francis Parishes
January 30, and February 1, 2015

Today's Scriptures are about prophets, speaking with authority, and about freeing people of unnecessary anxieties and worries. My thoughts this week took me in a different direction, however. Thus we are going to spend a little time reflecting together about evil and the devil.

As a young boy I never read the Bible. We had a Bible at home, but it was kept in the box and on a shelf. We read Bible stories in grade school, so I did know some of the O.T. and N.T stories. In college, after I decided to study for the priesthood, I started to read the entire Bible, but never accomplished that. I got stuck in the books of Kings, and never went back at it.

My seminary years coincided with the Vatican Council II. New documents were coming from the Council throughout each of those four years. One of them that had a huge impact on life in the Church and on the teaching of the Church was the Constitution on Divine Revelation. That is the document that made the Scriptures more accessible to all people, and also the one to teach that the interpretation of the Scriptures could use the technique of literary criticism. This meant that when reading the Psalms, you needed to keep in mind that it was poetry, and then read it and understand it like poetry. And, when reading books of the OT like Kings, you needed to remember that history for people then was not as exact as history for us today. The point is that you needed to read the Scriptures remembering the style, and the patterns of the time and people during which the Scriptures were written.

Why am I telling you this? Because as a result of this new approach to the Scriptures, I more or less reasoned my way out of my traditional understanding of some of the biblical events, one of them being my understanding of the devil. Case in point: today we have a gospel text that includes an exorcism, Exorcism is the casting out of evil spirits, and most usually that means the devil. Of course, as a kid, the devil was a wiry man with a tail, pointed ears, dressed in long red underwear and a pitchfork of some kind in his hand. As an educated seminarian, understanding the devil as some kind of 'red imp' wasn't working. But where I ended up with my understanding of Satan, the devil, and where I can be a bit still today, is that yes, I do believe in evil it is all around us, but my understanding became more that evil was a 'force' rather than a person. This seemed to fit with the literary criticism approach of how to read and understand the Scriptures.

I agree that evil is undeniable. The nightly news, for example, usually has one or two stories that are more than tragic, terrible ... they are stories of things that are just evil. I

get that, and know that evil is present in the world. But I have always let it be rather vague, and grew out of the habit of attaching the presence and cause of evil to a definite figure, like Satan, or the devil. Oddly, I have no problem attaching goodness and grace to Jesus, or the Father, or the Holy Spirit. Fast forward to the present time, my understanding is changing again. Someone I worked with at a previous parish and now Pope Francis, and maybe my age, are calling me to take still another look.

The Staff person in a previous parish had the role of parish nurse. Her spiritual life was very charismatic. She attended weekly prayer meetings, spoke in tongues, and freely prayed over people for healing. This was new to me, especially her spontaneity with all of this. She would frequently say to me “You don't know the power you have.” She didn't mean me personally, but me as priest, as someone with the grace of Orders. And she would often speak of evil and wild things as the works of Satan. Her approach was very literal ... she had no doubt that it was the devil who was behind something ... and I was holding out for the “yes, there is evil” approach, but I did not see Satan behind every instance of evil in the world. We would have long discussions about this. She has since died, and I think of her and pray for her often.

Then there is Pope Francis ... In the book I just finished, very near the end the author says of him:

“(For Pope Francis) God is sovereign, the devil is active, we must discern and choose. ... Francis sees the devil not as a myth or theological proposition but a daily reality, the “prince of this world” who hates holiness and tempts through riches, power, and pride to persuade us to look to our own resources, not God's. In a May, 2013 homily, Pope Francis said, “The origin of the hatred is this: we are saved; and that prince of the world, who does not want us to be saved, hates us and gives rise to the persecution that from earliest times of Jesus continues until today.” He warned that “with that prince you cannot dialogue.”

Francis sees the devil behind the intractable, violent conflicts of the world. When he brought together Israeli president Shimon Peres and Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas at the Vatican to pray for peace on June 8, 2014, he told them: “More than once we have been on the verge of peace, but the evil one, employing a variety of means, has succeeded in blocking it. That is why we are here, because we know and we believe that we need the help of God.”

Today's Scriptures teach that Jesus has power, authority over evil; he has power and authority over Satan, the devil. As you and I prepare to head into a very holy season, namely Lent, do not underestimate the obstacles that Satan may toss in your way. He does not want us to be holy. He does not want us to be disciples. Satan does not want us to live as baptized Christians. Satan wants us to give up on Jesus and all goodness. As we prayed in Advent, maybe we should pray again Prepare Ye The Way of the Lord. The Kingdom is at hand.

