

When the Angels Come [Scott Kinder-Pyle]
Matthew 4:1—11; Genesis 2:15—17; 3:1—7

In the Charlotte Brontë story of *Jane Eyre*, a young girl is sent to live with her aunt, who had been charged with raising the child as if she were one of her own daughters. Instead, Jane is ostracized, beaten and finally told that she has ‘*the devil*’ in her. It’s a horribly dysfunctional nineteenth century dynamic; but when the clergyman’s invited to help, he makes things worse:

“And what is hell? Can you tell me that?” he says to Jane.

She answers, “A pit full of fire.”

“And should you like to fall into that pit, and to be burning there for ever?”

“No, sir.”

“What must you do to avoid it?”

“I must keep in good health, and not die.”

Now, I’m bringing this dialogue to our attention because maybe we’ve been there. Maybe, from time to time, we’ve been accused—accused of having *the devil in us*—and that doesn’t feel good. Being accused *of anything* doesn’t feel good. I have a visceral memory of my mother accusing me of abusing the tennis racket that she had given me for my birthday. And you know what I had done to abuse the tennis racket? I used it to hit a tennis ball; and striking it a little off center, the whole head of the racket folded like a slice of limp pizza. But to this day I remember being accused. Moreover, even if what we’re accused of appears true, perfectly valid and innocent, it doesn’t feel good. For example, if I accuse you of belonging to this church—or to any community of faith—you might say, ‘*Yes, of course. What’s the crime here?*’

Now, in Matthew's Gospel, one of the things that needs clarification is the identity of a certain shady character—otherwise known as the *Devil*, a.k.a., *Beelzebub*, a.k.a., *Satan*, which may literally be translated, *The Accuser*. And if you happen to be mildly curious about why this personification of evil plays such a large part in the biblical narrative, pay attention to how *you* feel whenever you're ACCUSED. Jesus, in this morning's reading, is accused of being the Son of God—and as a Christian, you might think, 'What's the big deal? Of course he is. That's what I believe...' And yet, please notice how the Accuser accuses him, ***“If you are the Son of God... If you are the Son of God...”*** In other words, PROVE IT. I bet you can't prove it. Command these stones to become bread. Take a flying leap off the top of the temple. And, you see, it's the stubborn resistance to proving it that ushers in the angels.

The angels of Matthew 4:11 arrive on the scene only when Jesus has demonstrated that he doesn't need to prove it. He doesn't need to prove that he is the Beloved Son of God. And that may be a clue to how you and I may face up to evil in our own lives. Do we need to prove it? Are we tempted to prove it? And by 'it' I mean *either* how impressively good we are (irrespective of faith) *or* how impressively faithful we are. Do we need to prove it? Are we tempted to prove that we're not the evil ones? *'The evil's over there. The evil's in those guys over there. There's nothing to see here.'* The Speaker of the House of Representatives points to the words etched in marble in the halls of Congress. They read, *'In God We Trust,'* and Mr. Johnson seems so proud to prove how the country was founded on Christian principles. And he's also ready to accuse anyone who opposes him of not sharing those principles. But I wonder about that. I wonder if that's not a temptation to resist.

The Crucible is a play by Arthur Miller that depicts the Salem Witch Trials of 1692; but by writing and performing the story in 1950's America, the parallels with Joseph McCarthy and the Communist 'Red-Scare' are striking. *Have you ever consorted with the Devil? What were you doing in the woods, dancing around the fire? Have you ever attended a meeting of the Communist Party? Have you ever read a book by Karl Marx? How about Groucho Marx? No? Well, prove it. You've been accused. And now, if you don't name names—accusing others—it's not going to go so well with you.*

Too often, I'm afraid, people like us settle for a *caricature* of evil. We like to point out the obvious Devil in the room—the one with the bifurcated tail and the horns protruding from his snakeskin head. And almost as a way of separating ourselves from evil, we take delight in the demon-possession and the blood-curdling screams of *The Exorcist*, *The Omen*, *The Witches of Eastwich*, *The Devil and Mrs. Jones*, *The Devil Went Down to Georgia*... *The Devil Wears Prada* — or even in Dante's classic *Paradise Lost*. In popular culture the personification of evil has run wild—so much so that we've become desensitized to the subtlety. And the subtlety of evil infiltrates by insinuation. It comes in the form of a slippery innuendo: ***“Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’”***

Hmmm, let me think: I need to be sure.

That's right, you need to be sure. And do you know how you can be sure? Eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil. Because when you eat it, you're going to have absolute certainty—like God. And what's so bad about that?

“So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her and he ate.”

Now, I want to be clear—as clear as mud, dirt, dust and ashes. Let’s not argue (with anybody) about whether this Genesis passage represents a real-life, historically-verifiable event. I don’t believe it does, and I think I can offer you some reasons why it’s not necessary to prove it. But that’s not the point. The point is what’s happening right now: DO WE WANT TO BELIEVE IN OUR OWN CAPACITY FOR BEING CERTAIN ABOUT WHAT’S GOOD AND WHAT’S EVIL—a capacity which will most certainly lead to us accusing someone else of doing something wrong—OR DO WE WANT TO TRUST IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD?

C.S. Lewis once offered this comment: “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.” And isn’t that spot-on? It’s a mistake to ignore the pernicious reality of evil in the world and to pretend it doesn’t exist. But it’s also a mistake to obsess and to catastrophize and to accuse everyone with whom we’re in conflict as being motivated by dark forces. After all, a little later in Matthew 12, Jesus himself is accused of casting out demons by “*by Beelzebul, the ruler of demons.*” And his response is masterful.

“If I cast out demons by Beelzebul,” he says to the Pharisees, by whom do our own exorcists cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you” [v. 27—28].

In other words—WE’LL SEE. If an accusation of some evil doesn’t lead toward (the taking of) accountability and toward the possibility of genuine forgiveness, we’ll see. You and I do not get to make the final judgment.

On the fourth floor of *Sacred Heart Hospital*, at the height of the Covid epidemic, I visited a young man with tattoos up and down his arms. And noticing them, I asked, “What do these symbols mean to you?” With great hesitation he replied that he was a Satanist, and that the marks on his skin reminded him that he was a creature of the earth. So, with my Celtic cross dangling from my neck, I could see him looking up at me and waiting on the judgment to descend. And I could see him studying my face for even a hint of condemnation. But nothing came. I simply listened. I listened to him say, “I really don’t believe in an actual Satan. I don’t worship the fallen angel of Christian mythology. People misunderstand what this religion is about...” And here’s where the Spirit of God, in that instance, gave me the grace to do—or not to do—and that I sometimes fail to do. I did not ACCUSE him. Instead, I admitted to him how the Christian faith itself had done some pretty terrible, evil things. And then I mentioned how I don’t mind being considered a creature of the earth as well as a citizen of heaven; and that I believe the Creator became a creature of the earth in Jesus—and the thought of that blows my mind. He then smiled as if what I had just said was absolutely absurd. And I shrugged.

The entire portfolio of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection *is* absurd. And its absurdity lies in the hope that he is ABSORBING EVIL. Jesus is not demanding that we justify ourselves. On the contrary, when you and I seek to justify ourselves, we typically do it by accusing and scapegoating someone else. Jesus will boldly become the scapegoat for us. Second Corinthians 5:21 declares: **“God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us”**— which is why every Sunday we don’t confess how certain we are that we are right and the rest of the world is wrong. We confess how we often feel so ACCUSED—and *God, forgive us!*

In northwest Ohio I was the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church; and next to us, a few blocks over, was *Ohio Northern University*. A new charismatic leader joined the faculty there, and immediately began circulating a petition that said if you did not believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, you were not a Christian. *If you are a Christian*, he seemed to say, *you'll sign my petition and believe like I believe...* Anyway, as pastor, I had members of our church who didn't want to subscribe; and they started to doubt if they could continue to follow Jesus if the prerequisite was believing that Adam and Eve were real-life historical persons. And I had taught folks who noticed how the four gospels didn't agree on the number of angels at the empty tomb on Easter Day (in Matthew and Mark, it's one and in Luke and in John it's two); and they didn't think it should matter to their faith if they had a question about any of those discrepancies. These were faculty members, administrators and custodians but they were my brothers and sisters and siblings in Christ. And so, I preached a sermon entitled, "God Wants Your Salt and Not Your Signature" that said signing the petition didn't prove whether you were a Christian or not. And wow! According to some in that small, gossipy town, *I was the Devil himself*. But not everyone thought so.

I don't think Jesus thought so. In fact, in today's gospel, whenever Satan quotes a Bible verse at Jesus—accusing him of not believing the legalistic, exact, gotcha-sort of words—Jesus is clear—as clear as the mud, dust, dirt and ashes of the wilderness. Jesus does not worship the Bible. He worships the One who has nurtured and nourished him through the community of human beings who've grown weary of being accused. And the angels come for the accused. The angels come for the accused. They come when there's nothing to prove.