

We were sitting around the table in the student union sipping cokes, talking about all the pretty girls new on the campus that semester, and the prospects of the football team winning the big game that Saturday, when someone raised the question, "What do you think about the devil?" We turned to him and said, "What do you mean?"

"I mean," replied, "where do you think all this evil and suffering in the world come from? Just look at the headlines: there is a war going in southeast Asia, an earthquake in Turkey, a hurricane in the Atlantic, and crime in the streets, and thousands of people are suffering and dying. Where does it all come from?"

Talk about a conversation stopper. We completely forgot about the big game on Saturday and everything else; suddenly the conversation changed direction completely, and the students began sharing their opinions.

Where do you think evil in the world comes from?

Some people answer that there is no answer. It just is. For thousands of years the earth has been shaking, the winds have been blowing and people have been suffering and dying in what we call natural disasters. The recent earthquake in southeastern Iran is just the latest example; thousands of people have died and many more have been left grieved and homeless simply because they had the misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Some people answer that there is no answer. Evil just is, it just happens, and there is nothing really that we can do about it.

Others answer that it is all God's fault. Some people believe that God causes everything that happens. Everything that happens is God's will, they say. Every event and every accident. Every deed and every misdeed is done according to God's will. And they find comfort in that belief even though they suffer because they say that it all happens according to some plan, foreordained from the foundation of the world.

But those of us who believe that a good God has created us to live in this world cannot swallow that idea. And so we look for other answers.

What about all this evil in the world? Where does it come from?

Those of you who are old enough to remember the 1970's remember the comedian Flip Wilson. Sometimes he would strut around the stage taking the part of Geraldine, and do crazy things, and say, "The devil made me do it. The devil made me

do it." And some people blame all the evil in the world on the devil, believing that there is some super power of darkness hiding around every corner which pounces on unsuspecting souls who are not careful about their hearts and minds.

Some people to blame it on the devil. But what do you think about that idea?

If we look into the Old Testament we don't find it.

In the Old Testament, "Satan" appears only three times, (Job, Zechariah and 1 Chronicles), and in none of those places does Satan appear as a destructive demonic figure opposed to God and responsible for all the evil in the world.

For the ancient Jews, there was but one power in the universe, the Lord God almighty, who loved the people and always wanted to bless them health and wealth, but who punished them with calamity when they broke God's covenant, worshiped foreign gods, turned to greed, immorality.

A few hundred years before Christ, the idea of a supernatural universal power, separate and opposed to God crept into Jewish thought from Iranian mythology. According to that myth there was a force which embodied all the features of evil; who brought death into the world, controlled all the evil spirits, was the father of lies, and caused bodily deformities and afflictions and human suffering.

And it took hold because the Jews had lost faith in God as their land had been over run, and their people had been killed and carried into exile, by one enemy after another for hundreds of years.

In the New Testament there are traces of this influence. There Satan has become the personification of evil; Satan appears as a distinct personality, who enters into people and is responsible for their passions and evil deeds; who tempted Simon Peter and entered into Judas to betray Judas, who prompts Ananias to withhold his contribution to the church, who shuts men and women's hearts against the message of God, obstructs the spread of the gospel, who causes physical pain and afflictions; who is a power of darkness and the enemy of light and God, but who can disguise himself as "an angel of light."

And the belief in a supernatural power of evil has continued through the centuries, and capture the minds of many people.

In the middle ages Dante's "Inferno" expanded the ideas of hell and the devil. Faust told legends about selling his soul to the devil, named Mephistopheles, and first pictured the devil with horns and cloven feet and a tail and a pitchfork.

And still today people accept the idea that it is the Devil and his angels, stalking the earth, taking possession of little girls and boys, using all kinds of men and women to bring violence and evil to the world.

But the Christian faith says that though the struggle of good and evil in the world is real, For all its mention of Satan, the New Testament never loses sight of this fact, this is God's world, and God's power will ultimately triumph over evil. That is the truth which the stories of Jesus driving out demons teach. This the truth which the book of Revelation tries to teach, with its strange symbols and beasts, and anti-Christ, God will triumph.

In the Colossian letter the apostle Paul declares the victory of God, saying that God "has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son...." "He has disarmed the rulers and authorities...." (NRSV), the "principalities and powers" (RSV).

Paul has declared that Christ has defeated all those spirits, demons and devils which the ancient people believed took possession of people and brought evil upon them. Christ has disarmed them, stripped them of their power. And like a conquering general of the Roman army would march his victorious armies through the streets of Rome, parading behind his victorious soldiers the kings and leaders of the people he had conquered.

This is God's world, it belongs to no one else. The truth is described by Paul in a different way in the 8th chapter of Romans. "If God is for us," Paul asks, "who is against us?" Borrowing the image of the courtroom, where an accuser - Satan - brings charges, Paul says,

"Who will bring any charges against God's" people? No one! It is God who sets us free from the accuser. Therefore, we are confident that nothing and no one will be able to separate us from the love of God our liberator - no angels, rulers, powers, nothing else on earth or in the cosmos will be able to separate us from the love of God. Nothing and no one!

Not "ghosties and ghoulies and four-legged beasties and things that go bump in the night."

Martin Luther said it well,

And though this world with devils (spelled with a small d) filled,
should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear for God has willed
the truth to triumph through us.
The powers of darkness grim, we tremble not for them;
their rage we can endure, for lo, their doom is sure,
One little word shall fell them.

Where does all the evil in the world come from? I do not have the final answer, but this I know, that sometimes we bring it upon ourselves.

It is said that when the Great Wall of China was built, almost immediately the

Mongolian invaders found a way to get in. They did not breach the wall - they merely bribed the gate keeper, and marched right through it. It is from the inside that we fall. And it is on the inside the battle against evil is fought, and must be won. The problem is not without, but within. And if we are going to fight the problem of evil, we had better begin with ourselves.

The problem is not with some super human power lurking just around the corner, or little devil waiting for an opportunity to jump on my back, the problem is within each of us.

Jesus knew that it was true. He was confronted by the scribes and Pharisees about the problem of eating and drinking on the Sabbath. Such a thing was surely a great evil to them, but Jesus reminded them to look inside themselves,

"It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles."

"For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander."

The battle for purity and goodness is not a matter of externals, but internals, it is in the heart.

Jesus knew this from his own personal experience. He knew that the battle with Satan was really a battle within his own heart and soul. The gospels say that Jesus went out in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights after he was baptized, and there he found the battle of temptation. The gospel writers says that he tempted by the devil. Perhaps there was someone out there with hooved feet and pointed ears, with pitch fork in hand, whispering in his ear, trying to twist his thoughts and turn him from his God-given mission? But I don't think so!

I think he was out there wrestling with something down deep inside himself, struggle to overcome the temptation to misuse his power and make his ministry an Oral Roberts style side-show, the temptation to take political and religious power for selfish purposes. It was a struggle for his soul, fought deep within his heart.

Evil is real. Whether we call it capital S, Satan, or remove the D from Devil and simply speak of evil, we can be sure that evil is real. There can be no question about it. That which is variously called Satan, the Devil, Belial, Beelzebul, Azael, and Beelzebub, that evil is real in this world.

We are made painfully aware of it almost every day, from wars in far off lands, to terrorist bombings of airliners and federal buildings, to the crime in the streets of major cities, to the streets of the city where we live, and sometimes even to the homes where we live. We know that evil is real.

But there is another reality. There is another power, which works within us, and

among us, and comes from a great source of life beyond us all.

In the middle chapters of the Roman letter the apostle Paul spoke about that power. He wrote about the terrific inner conflict which must have gripped his life.

"I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."

As he tried to live by the law of Christ, he discovered another law within himself, he knew that power of evil lying within his own heart and mind.

"Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death."

But Paul also knew another power at work within him. Which struggled with him to overcome evil with good. Which enabled him to say,

"We are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

"Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

When we were in Scotland playing several years ago, we visited the famous Loch Ness. On a cool and foggy summer evening we came to that lake which is only a few miles across, but hundreds of feet deep, deeper than men and machines can dive. As we stood on the bank watching the wind and the waves, I wondered if we might see the famous Loch Ness monster. And I was reminded of the American tourists who stopped at Loch Ness, in hopes of catching a glimpse of Nessie. After waiting for a while, one of the tourists walked up to Scotsman nearby who was enjoying the summer evening, and asked, "When does the monster come out?" The local looked him in the eye for a moment and then replied, "For you, Sir, probably after about four scotches."

May God give us eyes to recognize those monsters which lie close at hand.

May God give us faith to know that evil need not rule in this world.

May God give us all the strength to defeat all those monsters and overcome every evil with divine goodness. Amen.