

Creationist 2.0

Creating Opposes Evil

20 November 2022

Call to Worship – Psalm 46

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.

**Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; *Selah***

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.

**The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge. *Selah***

“Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.”

**The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.**

Power in the Blood

Lewis E. Jones

Would you be free from the burden of sin?
There's power in the blood, power in the blood;
Would you o'er evil a victory win?
There's wonderful power in the blood.

There is power, power, wonder-working power
In the blood of the Lamb;
There is power, power, wonder-working power
In the precious blood of the Lamb.

Would you be free from your passion and pride?
There's power in the blood, power in the blood;
Come for a cleansing to Calvary's tide;
There's wonderful power in the blood.

Would you be whiter, much whiter than snow?
There's power in the blood, power in the blood;
Sin-stains are lost in its life-giving flow;
There's wonderful power in the blood.

Would you do service for Jesus your King?
There's power in the blood, power in the blood;
Would you live daily His praises to sing?
There's wonderful power in the blood.

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

People, God, people all around us
Large people, small people, tall people, short people
Smart people, fast people, slow people, stopped people
Friendly people, grumpy people, sad people, fearful people
Angry people, weary people, careful people, sloppy people
Lonely people, foolish people, sorry people, arrogant people
Strong people, weak people, generous people, stingy people

We are surrounded by people who bear their creator's mark
They may not notice, they may not care
They may notice and still not care
They may know and be glad

You see us, God, every one of us
And you are glad that you have made us
Even in our worst moments, you love us
Teach us to listen and look for the love you have for people
Forgive us for when we despise or fail to care for even the least of those you love.

We bring our private confessions to you now.

Our God fulfils his promises and is true to his word.

We have confessed our sins.

God has forgiven us,

because Christ died for us. Amen.

The Peace

Reading Genesis 4:1-12

Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have produced a man with the help of the LORD." ² Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. ³ In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, ⁴ and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions.

And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, ⁵ but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.

⁶ The LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? ⁷ If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.”

⁸ Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let us go out to the field.” And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him. ⁹ Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” ¹⁰ And the LORD said, “What have you done? Listen; your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground! ¹¹ And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. ¹² When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.”

Reflection

My theme today has led me down quite a rabbit hole. The question of what it means to oppose evil must deal with what evil is. In other words, how do I know if what I am looking at is evil? What is it about a particular event that requires me to use the term evil in describing it? Is it the action that is evil or is it the person or persons performing the action that are evil? I’m hoping that you don’t decide to pack up and go home literally or figuratively at this point because I think that perhaps now, more than at any time in the last 50 or 70 years we are facing times and events that may call on us to bring out the term evil. And if we are to do that we had better be careful that we know what we are talking about.

Very quickly, there are two kinds of discussion about evil. The first is broad evil. It can be summarised as having two kinds – natural evil – things like disease or hurricanes, and moral evil – where people are involved. The second discussion is about something called narrow evil which picks out the most despicable moral acts and condemns them. More on this as we go.

Rather than dump my summary of evil on you all in one hit I would like to use our readings to explore some of the ideas. Perhaps we can find some paths through the rabbit warren of conflicting ideas and gain a glimpse of how God is speaking to us today.

Cain and Abel

Cain was a tiller of the ground and Abel a keeper of sheep. At some point the two men brought God an offering. Cain, something that he had grown, and

Abel also brought something he had grown. At first glance you would look at this and think, it seems fair to bring an offering of what you have produced in your work. But the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering and no regard for Cain and his offering. Why? We might think that perhaps the problem is around the kind of offering the two men have brought. Was it that Cain brought vegetables and Abel brought meat? A good guess, but it misses a key idea. It's hard to pick up in the English translation beyond the words, 'their fat portions.' Here we find the root of the issue. Cain simply grabbed whatever came to hand. He may have even chosen the leftovers after he had taken what he wanted. Abel, on the other hand, brought God the fat portions. In other words, Abel's offering was of the best he had. The issue wasn't in the quantity of the offering or even in its nature, it was in the quality of what was presented. Abel showed respect to God by offering his best. Cain disrespected God by offering the leftovers.

This isn't an offering problem; it is an attitude problem. Immediately we come to one of the fundamental aspects defining evil. It's all about attitude.

Caveat: there are a range of ideas around what I am going to be talking about and I would be happy to direct you to some excellent reading material about the problem of evil. I'm not going to give all sorts of arguments and counter-arguments. I am going to go with what seems to fit with my understanding of who God is and how God interacts with us fallible human beings. I am also very happy to talk further with you if you would like to pursue any of the ideas I share.

So, the first point here is that evil is about attitude. An attitude that attributes respect toward God in the first instance and then toward other people is less likely to result in evil. When we come to a point where we no longer respect God or other people, we find ourselves in a dangerous place. As the ancient mapmakers liked to say, 'Here be dragons.'

In our story about Cain and Abel, Cain's lack of respect toward God manifested itself in his killing of Abel. Rather than go down the route of accepting that the way to please God was to offer of his best, Cain killed the person who, in his mind, had shown him up as lacking. His moral compass was so out of kilter that it was more important to his pride to eliminate the competition than to address the actual problem.

So the next suggestion I have to make about evil is that it involves a failure to seek the best for the other. This can be an active failure such as Cain's

elimination of his competition, or a passive failure where a person might participate in evil by failing to act. Hannah Arendt referred to this passive failure as the 'banality of evil'.¹ I think it is this second variety of evil that is more dangerous for most of us. Actively working against others is generally pretty easy to spot and so it can be dealt with. Passively allowing evil to happen by not acting when we can is much harder to deal with.

The third aspect of evil I want to highlight here is the cover-up. When God asked Cain where Abel was, Cain lied and said he didn't know. We can see the flow from lack of respect and failing to seek the best. Hiding the consequences is a natural outcome. When we find ourselves covering up the consequences of our actions we can be reasonably confident that we have landed on a rather slippery slope.

So. All this is to get us to the point of knowing what we are looking to oppose. There is a huge amount more to it and as I have thought about evil I have realised that it is not something we talk about very much, even though we are surrounded by its consequences. Yes, we hear the media talk about the evil done by a gunman or someone who has killed a child. But for the most part we give little thought to what is actually going on or to what our response might be beyond expressing shock and horror. For now, let's turn our focus toward the very opposite of evil as we sing.

Salvation belongs to our God

Pat Turner

Salvation belongs to our God
Who sits upon the throne
And unto the Lamb
Praise and glory
Wisdom and thanks
Honour and power and strength

Be to our God forever and ever
Be to our God forever and ever
Be to our God forever and ever, amen

¹ Arendt, H., 1951 [1985], *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, San Diego: A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Inc.

And we the redeemed shall be strong
In purpose and unity
Declaring aloud
Praise and glory
Wisdom and thanks
Honour and power and strength

Reading Mark 5:1-20

They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. ² And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. ³ He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; ⁴ for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. ⁵ Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. ⁶ When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; ⁷ and he shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me." ⁸ For he had said to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" ⁹ Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "My name is Legion; for we are many." ¹⁰ He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. ¹¹ Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; ¹² and the unclean spirits begged him, "Send us into the swine; let us enter them." ¹³ So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea. ¹⁴ The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. ¹⁵ They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. ¹⁶ Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. ¹⁷ Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. ¹⁸ As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. ¹⁹ But Jesus refused, and said to him, "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you." ²⁰ And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

Reflection

This story is of a very public confrontation with a very public evil. Everyone in the surrounding villages and towns knew about this man who lived in the local cemetery. People had attempted to tie him and shackle him and he had simply broken the bonds and carried on with his behaviour. We see no mention of how he was fed. I suspect it is likely that the locals brought food in the hope that he would stay away from them in their comfortable homes. In other words, they had done their best to find a way to live with the evil on their doorsteps. It was easier to allay and ignore than it was to confront. Something that prompts the image of Neville Chamberlain stepping off the plane and announcing, 'Peace in our Time.' Better to make a deal with the evil next door than to pay the price of opposing it.

This, to my mind, is the biggest problem we face in opposing evil. It's just so hard. Most of you are probably not aware, but it is a running joke about ministers that in our pastoral roles we would rather dance around a problem than face it down and deal with it.

I want to tell you a story about an organist. Before I do that I want to say that I have never met an organist like this, I have only heard stories. A number of years ago, while I was training for ministry I picked up a summer supply job at a church where the minister wanted to go on holiday. I arrived a few days before he headed off and we went through the ins and outs of the parish, how services generally went, who did what and when, what would be expected of me and so on. Just before he headed off he warned me about the organist. This organist was an ogre. They refused to play hymns he had chosen when they didn't like them, they insisted that things be done their way and no other. To listen to the minister, the organist held the entire church to ransom. I was suitably warned and he left for his holiday.

The next day I made an appointment to visit the organist. We sat and chatted about life the universe and everything. We explored music and talked about our likes and dislikes. I learnt her history as a musician and heard stories of ministers and their foibles. We got on rather well. I arranged to visit again in a couple of days to talk about music for church. There we hummed and haahed over music for different hymns and had ideas for changing things around a little. Just a little. I discovered that this ogre of an organist was a lovely person who enjoyed playing and was quite open to trying new things with a little encouragement. We became friends over that time and between us managed

to have some, for that church at least, quite innovative music happening in the worship times.

Let me be honest here. I was terrified the first time I went to visit this lady. When you are primed to be greeted with hellfire and brimstone it can be a rather intimidating experience. What it taught me is this. When I am met with someone who is being difficult the very first thing to do is to face up to them. In the words of St Francis of Assisi, Grant that I may not so much seek to be understood, as to understand. Now, please, don't misunderstand me – I am not suggesting the organist was evil. Far from it. What I am suggesting is that the lesson I learned applies equally to dealing with evil. When we come across evil, we need to face up to it. Simply feeding it and hoping it won't come near our homes is no solution.

I would love to spend far more time than we have on all of this. Forgive me if the rest of what I share seems a little like bullet points. I want us to have a framework for thinking about how we oppose evil even if it is not fully fleshed out.

Point one in opposing evil is facing it. In other words we acknowledge that it exists, that it affects us and that it cannot be left to fester. This is much harder than it sounds. I understand why we so seldom oppose evil. It is costly and it seems like it is creating division. We can't let our fear of what people think stop us from standing up for the best for others and ourselves.

Point two in opposing evil is that it likely won't simply lie down and let us push it around. See what the demoniac did with Jesus. He ran up to him, calling out to cause a scene, bowed down and, even in the face of greater power, attempted to bargain. Evil will cause a scene, it will bargain, it will try to make you seem like the one in the wrong. Evil will even pretend to show respect while doing its best to undermine everything you are doing. Here's the thing. You can't bargain with evil. It will always have its way. The moment you give ground it will take that and more. Neville Chamberlain declared peace in our time on the 30th of September 1938. Less than one year later, on the 1st of September 1939, Germany invaded Poland. Hitler had caused a scene by occupying Czechoslovakia in May 1938. He bargained with Chamberlain and took everything he was offered. And then he went ahead with his original plan, the peace contract not worth the paper it was written on.

Point three in opposing evil is that it requires clear, decisive action. In Jesus' words, 'Come out of him, you unclean spirit.' That action doesn't have to be

loud or obnoxious, merely polite and firm. Opposing evil is not a spectator sport, it doesn't require advertising. What it does require is confidence. That confidence is found in knowing your place in Christ. It is also found in knowing you are not alone. Something too easily forgotten is that opposing evil should be a team sport. In other words, bring others along with you, for safety, for encouragement and for shared wisdom.

Point four in opposing evil is that not everyone will be happy about what you are doing. Sometimes an uncomfortable known seems better than any kind of unknown. Many people would have simply put up with the demoniac rather than deal with the consequences of the man sitting in his right mind before Jesus. And a side note – evil can be profitable and anything that affects that profit is seen as a problem – taking us back to the banality of evil I mentioned before. People get used to it, learn how to make a profit from it, then feed it. No wonder they are upset when someone opposes it.

Enough for now. This has been a fairly intense message but one I think is significant for our times. Today we face evil in numerous forms and if it is not the church who stands up to oppose it then who? We've not mentioned creating directly today, yet it is wound into our actions as we seek God's best for our world.

We Pray

God who loves without measure, cast out our fear of evil with your love. Teach us to oppose evil in all its forms in the confidence we find in our relationship with Jesus. Gift us insights into how we oppose evil with wisdom and decisiveness. Enable us to live out your victory over sin and death in what we say and in what we do. May our opposing evil bring glory to you and help to bring about your kingdom here where we are. Through Jesus, who opposed evil even to his death on the cross, giving the final victory over sin and death, amen.

Jesus, we enthrone you

Paul Kyle

Jesus, we enthrone You

We proclaim You are king

Standing here, in the midst of us

We raise You up with our praise

And as we worship build Your throne

And as we worship build Your throne

And as we worship build Your throne

Come Lord Jesus and take Your place

Offering

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/>

Almighty, Creator God, we humbly bring our gifts to you this day. On Calvary's cross, your son redefined for the world what it meant to rule, what it meant to be a king. In his life, teaching and interacting with people, Jesus redefined what it means to give in a way that pleases God. May we in this season live and give in a way that reflects the reign over us and the one who lives within us. In the exalted name of Christ, we pray. Amen.

Prayer for Others and Ourselves

Holy One, right now, anti-government protests continue in Iran, where local human rights activists report 328 have been killed and more than 14,000 others have been detained, including children. Witnesses report the detained are being tortured. The captives are brave, though bleeding; the pain they witness is as harsh as the pain they suffer. Dull the edge of the captor's bloodlust; sharpen the resolve of the righteous; create a place where suffering is subdued and human rights are restored.

Peace-Creator, right now the war against Ukraine continues, even as United Nations officials plan to meet with a Russian delegation in Geneva (Switzerland) to discuss a plan to smooth shipments of Russian grain and fertilizers to global markets. Guide their conversation into paths of compromise so that the hungry will have food and the fearful living through the war will be encouraged by their progress.

God of all people, right now, candles are being lit in Jewish homes in remembrance of Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass, when Nazi leaders organized the destruction of Jewish-owned businesses, synagogues, and homes and 30,000 Jewish males were taken to concentration camps. Remind

us that the worst of history will repeat itself if humanity ceases to care for one another and do the work of standing together against evil. Disturb us with the truth of history such that our individual and collective desire to conquer evil is stronger than our fear and apathy.

Providing God, all around the world, even here in Oamaru, people are distracted and distressed over the effects of inflation, living in fear of the emergency that will break the tenuous hold they have on their finances. Rising grocery prices, increasing mortgage payments, petrol prices that seem to never come down. Break the hold banks and financial institutions have on ordinary people's lives. Challenge our attitudes toward those who have less and strengthen our hands to serve and support the poor and the neglected.

We remember the thousands of students in the middle of exams right now. We think particularly of those who struggle in a system designed for the success of a few. We remember their teachers looking forward to a well-earned break. Grant them fresh vision and renewed strength even before they head into the holiday season.

We bring those we love and care for before you. Our families and friends, our pets and loved places. Those who are travelling, who are unwell, who are confined or isolated.

All these things we pray through Jesus, our Lord and our Friend who taught us to pray...

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father who is in heaven, holy be your name
Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever.

Amen

Great is thy faithfulness

Thomas Obediah Chisholm, William Marion Runyan

Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father,
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not
As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be.

Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness!

Morning by morning new mercies I see;

All I have needed Thy hand hath provided—

Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!

Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,

Sun, moon and stars in their courses above,

Join with all nature in manifold witness

To Thy great faithfulness, mercy and love.

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,

Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;

Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,

Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!

[Benediction and Grace](#)

As we go on from here may we all, corporately and individually, seek to oppose evil wherever we find it...

May the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,

the Love of God,

and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit

be with us all, now and forevermore. Amen.

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