

**Sermon: The Devil's Envy**

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Wisdom of Solomon 1:12-15, 2:23-24; Mark 5:21-43**

The lectionary calls today's readings 'complementary,' meaning that the OT reading thematically pairs with the Gospel reading. This can help our understanding, but you still have to figure out the theme.

The Wisdom of Solomon is part of the Apocrypha, that group of books that were included in the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible but not in the Hebrew writings that form the Scripture used in Judaism and in Protestantism. The word *Apocrypha* means 'hidden things' and it could be that they were meant to be hidden because they might be heretical, or because their teachings were too mysterious or profound for our own good.

Either way, there are a lot of good stories in the Apocrypha, including the first detective story in the Book of Susanna, the additions to the Books of Esther and Daniel, and, of course, the Wisdom of Solomon, which was not written by Solomon at all.

The book was meant to encourage those Jews living outside Israel during the early Roman era. It is also, in part, a book about the soul's immortality.

Now, the reading is broken up in such a way that it seems to put focus on two verses: 'God did not make death,' and 'through the devil's envy death entered the world.'

There's an echo of Genesis 3 here, when the woman listened to the serpent, who was just a serpent, not Satan, not the devil. Remember, this is an English translation of a Greek translation of a Hebrew text. The Greek word translated into English as 'devil' is *diabolos*, which, in the original Hebrew, means 'slanderer' or 'accuser,' also known as *ha-Satan*, who appears most famously in the Book of Job. To better understand this passage, we want to separate the devil from the *diabolos*.

There are many ways to translate that last verse – at least four. What might be the truest and most accurate version reads like this:

But through an adversary's envy death enters the world,  
and those who belong to death's party put humanity to the test.<sup>1</sup>

Those who belong to death's party or company are the unrighteous who have turned from God and who have brought death into the world – their own *spiritual* death. Their words and actions serve to test the rest of humanity, and if you pass the test, you will enjoy immortal spiritual life as God intended, because God did not make death and does not delight in the death of the living (Wisdom 1:13).

The Gospel reading complements this theme by showing that one can be on the point of death and, by faith, be restored to life.

What Mark has done here is wrap a faith story around a faith story. Jairus' daughter is dying. When he saw Jesus, he knew this was the one man who could save her with just the touch of his hands. Without delay, Jesus went with him, no questions asked.

But then he's interrupted by a woman who has been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years, which happens to be about how long the sick daughter has been alive. Her illness has literally cost the woman a fortune in doctor's fees and she's no better off. But she heard about Jesus and now there he was in front of her. She figured if she could just touch him, she would be made well. It's always worth a shot, so she tried it, and it worked; she felt it in her body that she had been healed.

Jesus felt it too. With all the people jostling him in the crowd, he knew that someone had touched him. In fear and trembling, the woman said, it was me. Jesus said, "Your faith has made you well; go in peace."

Meanwhile, during the delay, the little girl, the other daughter of God in this story, died. Hearing this, Jesus responds pretty much as he did when he heard that Lazarus had died. He said to Jairus, "Don't worry; believe."

Taking only Peter, James, and John with him, Jesus enters the house. They find there some mourners weeping and making a commotion. When he explains that the girl is not dead but *sleeping*, they laugh at him. They know what death looks like; they're professionals. But Jesus is speaking in resurrection language, where death is called *sleep* to deny that it is the ultimate; he's declaring victory over Death.

Now, in both cases, Mark shows us that Jesus himself is the source of the healings. The power to heal comes *out* of him, not *through* him from somewhere else. Neither the woman nor Jairus needed to believe the right things about Jesus; they only needed believe in Jesus' power to help and to heal, and it worked, amazing everybody.

Notice that Jairus is mentioned by name just once. Mark always referred to him as one of the leaders of the synagogue, as in: ‘They came to the house of the leader of the synagogue,’ not simply to Jairus’ house. Jairus is the first Jewish religious official to show interest in Jesus and to respond to him in faith.<sup>2</sup>

Notice too that Peter, James, and John will also be present at the Transfiguration and at Gethsemane. They are the inner circle, witnesses to the most important moments in Jesus’ life and ministry, and they are the ones who tell the story later.

We can’t compare what Jesus did with today’s health care system. It’s apples and oranges. Very few people who visit their doctor today are looking for salvation. They just want the pain to go away.

Still, today and in the Biblical world, disease and health problems affect women and children in ways that don’t affect men, from childbirth complications to childhood diseases. If you live in a part of the world where health care is scarce or unreliable, women and children live in fear every day, especially in a world with Covid-19.

Faith is never some abstract belief in Jesus; faith means placing our trust in Jesus in the face of real and impending loss. But do we continue to trust Jesus when the prayed-for miracle does not occur? Would overwhelming odds in the moment wipe out our faith? Or would we take a risk and reach out to Jesus when we needed him most?

The Rev. William Sloane Coffin wrote that, “The one true freedom in life is to come to terms with death, and as early as possible, for death is an event that embraces all our lives.”<sup>3</sup> Those who think that death is the end might decide to live life as a free-for-all, to grab as much as they can, at the expense of everyone else.

On the other hand, the Wisdom of Solomon says that *righteousness* is immortal (1:15). Life does not end in the way we presume it does.

Christians place their hope in the power of the resurrection, and though we would all like to end up in Heaven, we are called to create the kingdom of God here on Earth, where God created all things so that they might live and enjoy life. This is good news for those who choose to live an ethical life in the midst of a world that is constantly enticing us to do otherwise, because God’s way leads to life and denies all adversaries.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Zurawski, Jason. 2012. "Separating the Devil from the Diabolos: A Fresh Reading of Wisdom of Solomon 2.24." *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 21 (4): 398.

<sup>2</sup> Boring, M. Eugene. *Mark: a Commentary*, 2006: 158.

<sup>3</sup> William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 167.