

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 Wisdom of Solomon is part of the Apocrypha, that group of books that were included in the Greek version of the Old Testament but not in the Hebrew Scripture used in Judaism. The word *Apocrypha* means 'hidden things' and it could be that they were meant to be hidden because they seemed heretical, or because their teachings might be 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 to remain loyal to their faith. It is also about wisdom as God's guiding force and how it can lead to the soul's immortality.

Now, the lectionary breaks up the Wisdom reading in such a way as to put focus on two verses: 'God did not make death,' and 'through the devil's envy death entered the world.' And therein lies the tension in the book – the tension between life and death, God and the devil, Death and Sophia (Wisdom), the righteous and the ungodly. A lot of thought went into these books, by the way.

There's an echo of Genesis 3 here, when the woman listened to the serpent, who at the time was just a serpent, not Satan, and not the devil. Remember, we're reading the 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 at least four ways to translate that last verse. What might be the truest and most accurate version goes 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.¹

Those who belong to death's party or company are the unrighteous who have turned from God and who have brought their own *spiritual* death into the world. 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 author goes on to say that 'envy does not associate with wisdom.' (6:23).

But can we really blame the presence of death in the world on an envious devil and an ungodly people?²

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

Mark has again wrapped a faith story around a faith story. Jairus' daughter is dying. He knew that Jesus was the only one who could save her with just the touch of his hands. Without delay, Jesus went with him, no questions asked.

But a woman who had suffered from hemorrhages for twelve years interrupted Jesus' mission. Her illness has cost her a fortune in doctor's fees and she's still no better off. She somehow had heard about Jesus and now there he was in front of her. She figured if she could just touch him, she would be healed and delivered. With a clear motive, she reached out, and it worked: she felt 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, "Daughter" – an affectionate and respectful term full of meaning for Mark's audience – "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be *healed* of your disease."

The word *healed* in Mark's Greek can have two meanings: it can mean to heal physically, and it can mean to be saved in a religious sense. This woman was more in need than she thought she was.

Meanwhile, during this short delay, the little girl, the other daughter of God in this story, has apparently died. Hearing the news, Jesus responded pretty much as he did when he heard that Lazarus had died.

He said to Jairus, "Don't worry; only believe" – have trust; be confident.

Along with Peter, James, and John, Jesus entered the house. They walked in on some mourners weeping and making a commotion. When Jesus explained that the girl was only *sleeping*, they laughed. They know what death looks like; this kid is dead.

But Jesus was speaking in resurrection language, where death is called a *sleep* from which one will awaken. This is Mark's hint of Jesus' ultimate 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. The woman in the crowd's faith was her response to what she heard about Jesus. She and Jairus believed in Jesus' power to help and to heal, and it worked, amazing everybody.

Jairus is the first Jewish religious official to show interest in Jesus and to respond to him in faith.³ Notice that he is mentioned by name just once. He is otherwise referred to as the leader of the synagogue until finally, at the end, he is simply the child's father.

Notice too how the number twelve keeps popping up. An historian named Richard Horsley suggests that '[insofar] as they represent other women in similar circumstances,' the girl and the woman represent the twelve tribes of Israel.⁴

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 from their physician. They just want the pain to go away or the bleeding to stop or the swelling to go down. And we very much want to avoid doctors who will bleed us dry – literally, sometimes – without relief or a cure.

Still, both today and in the Biblical world, health problems affect women and children in ways that don't affect men, from difficult pregnancies to labor and childbirth to deadly 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 that's just getting used to Covid-19. You never know what you'll catch.

Faith is never some abstract belief. Christian faith means placing our trust and confidence in Jesus in the face of real or impending loss. Faith can drive out fear.

But can we continue to trust Jesus if the prayed-for miracle does not occur? Would overwhelming odds in the moment wipe out our faith? Or do we take a risk and reach out to Jesus when we need him most, just on the off chance that he'd notice?

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.”⁵

Those who think that death is the end might decide that life is a free-for-all, and they should grab as much as they can, at the expense of everyone else.

On the other hand, the Wisdom of Solomon says that immortality is God’s gift to the righteous (1:15). Life does not end in the way we presume it does. Christians place their hope in the power of the resurrection. Not only can faith drive out fear, it can overcome death as well.

In the meantime, 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, where living according to God’s way leads to life and denies all adversaries. This is good news for those who choose to live an ethical life in a world that is constantly enticing us to do otherwise.

Amen.

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¹ 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.

² Sinnott, Alice M. 2010. “God’s Wisdom or the Devil’s Envy: Death and Creation Deconstructing in the Wisdom of Solomon.” *Colloquium* 42 (1): 103.

³ Boring, M. Eugene. *Mark: a Commentary*, 2006: 158.

⁴ Richard A. Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark’s Gospel* (Westminster John Knox, 2001), 211.

⁵ William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 167.