

“Combat”

Ephesians 6.10-12; James 4.7

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

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“... For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

We’re going to talk about *evil* today. We live in a world filled with terrorism, violence, sex trafficking, and war; a world filled with racism, greed, cruelty, and abuse. Evil is *real*. Why do all those bad things happen in the world? The New Testament answered that two thousand years ago. There are unseen forces at work. There is a dark world. There are spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

I want to talk today about the way evil tries to work its way into our lives. This is going to get personal. Raw. This is not your standard Presbyterian sermon. I’m taking some risks. I’m fully aware that some people might misunderstand me, some people might think I said things that shouldn’t be said from a pulpit in a church, some people might conclude I’ve gone off the deep end. I’ve been debating whether to give this sermon for a while, and I’ve had a very persistent sense that this is a message that you *need* to hear. I had second thoughts after I woke up this morning: should I really do this? The answer came: *Yes*. Evil needs to be exposed for what it is. I need to share with you some of the ways evil has tried to infiltrate *my* life. I debated: how much is enough? How much is *too* much? Earlier this week, I heard God say something like this: “What’s the worst they can do to you, Bill – *fire* you? For being *honest*? For speaking the *truth*?” I’m going to be honest. I’m going to speak truth.

Now, you have to understand. I didn’t grow up in a church that talked about Satan a lot. Rarely, if ever, as far as I can recall. The message was basically: “Do good. Help others. Obey the Ten Commandments. Listen to the teachings of Jesus, and try to follow them as best as you can. If you mess up, God will forgive you. And you’ll go to heaven when you die.” Evil wasn’t really on the radar screen. Satan, the devil, “the powers of this dark world,” “the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” – nah, we let the Nazarenes talk about that stuff. We didn’t talk much about evil at seminary either. Sure, we talked about “the problem of evil,” as it’s called in academic circles – what different theologians through the centuries have had to say about why there is evil in a world God created good. But we didn’t talk about evil on a personal level. We should have. Because one of the things I’ve learned over the course of the last 13 years is that there’s a target on my back. There’s a target on *your* back, too. There’s a target on the back of *everyone* who’s trying to be faithful to Jesus, and for those whose vocation is *sharing the gospel* – pastors, missionaries, teachers, evangelists – the target seems to be

especially big. Because evil perceives us as a *threat*. Anyone who is trying to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ is *dangerous* to the kingdom of darkness. So it tries to take us out – one by one. It looks for some kind of weakness, some Achilles heel, some chink in the armor, where evil can enter, and grow like a cancer, until *boom* – suddenly there’s a scandal, and a resignation, and a church in turmoil, and a lot of people wondering *how could this have happened*. I’ll tell you how. It’s because that pastor hadn’t learned spiritual warfare. How to fight the kingdom of darkness. *I’ve had to learn how to fight*.

Everybody’s story is different. We all have different weaknesses, different chinks in our armor. I’m going to share with you three ways that evil has tried to infiltrate my life – three chinks in my armor. First: my insecurity. My lack of self-confidence. I was on the wrong end of way too much teasing and ridicule when I was a kid. “Loser,” “wimp,” “nerd,” “we don’t want you on our team” – those messages hurt, a lot, and they had a dramatic and long-lasting impact on me. I’ve grown a lot; I’ve healed a lot; but there’s still a tender spot there. I’m not the most confident person in the world. The powers of darkness sometimes use that to their advantage. When I screw up, when I make a mistake, when I forget to do something important – the Enemy will take that and run with it. *Especially* when I’ve screwed something up *here*. When I’ve made a mistake, *here*. I hear *words*. I hear a *message*. And – forgive me, I need to be blunt – these are the words I hear: “You *suck* at this! You should just quit being a pastor and find something completely different to do with your life.” In my head I know that’s completely irrational. But in my *heart* ... boy, the Enemy sure does know how to penetrate our hearts.

Second: my dreams. Every now and then I have some very disturbing dreams. Very vivid, very real. *I feel like I’m there*. Saturday night, two weeks ago. I’m getting ready to preach that last sermon about Jesus being the only Way to the Father. That was an important one. It was critical that I do as good a job with it as I possibly could. I was up late, struggling to bring it into a coherent whole, trying to figure out how to articulate the key points. I finally got to bed at 1:00 – that’s late for me; I’m usually done by 10:00 or 11:00 at the latest – and there was still more work to do in the morning. That night, I had one of those dreams. In my dream, my beloved wife is accusing me – with *rage* and *fury* and *resentment* – of fathering a child with another woman. She’s got *evidence*. She can *prove* it. She can tell me that it happened on one of three specific nights. I’m adamant that I’m innocent, that I’ve never done anything which could have caused that (which is true, I haven’t!) – but she is so insistent and so persuasive that I start to believe that my memory must be faulty and that I really *did* do it. It was so incredibly *real*. When I finally woke up and realized it was just a dream, I breathed a *huge* sigh of relief. *Thank God – it was just a dream!* But where did it come from? From *God*? *I don’t think so!!!* From my subconscious? At some deep level do I truly *want* to father an illegitimate child, to wreck my marriage and my family that way? *Heavens, no!!!* No – that was the Enemy. I’ve got a really important sermon to deliver, and the Enemy want to throws me off course by making me question my fidelity to my wife.

Third: *spiritual oppression*. There are times when I feel really weighed down by an oppressive force. Like big, heavy, dark clouds completely obscuring the sun, but I feel it *physically*, like it’s trying to push *me* down, burden me with an impossible weight. The times when I feel it most often are Sunday afternoons, if I’ve preached a really powerful sermon that morning. Every now and then I have a day when ten or twelve people come up to me after worship and tell me what an *awesome* sermon that was. You’d think I’d go home and feel great the whole rest of the day. No, I go home and I start feeling

this *darkness*. The Enemy is *ticked*, and he wants me to know it. I just brought a little more Light into this church, which means the Enemy lost a bit more of his foothold, and he is *NOT* happy with me. This crushing spiritual weight starts to come over me, oppressing me, trying to persuade me that the sermon was filled with flaws, trying to prevent me from preaching another sermon like that *ever* again.

Seven weeks ago, the day I gave the “Somebody’s Sitting in My Pew!” sermon, practically from the moment I woke up, I was under attack. I started my day by reading a verse from Titus about living a “self-controlled, upright, and godly life in this present age” (Titus 2.12), and the Enemy immediately threw it right back at me: “See how far your life is from that reality? You’re no Christian. You shouldn’t be a pastor. What makes you think you have any right to stand up in front of other people and share God’s Word with them?” It was a brutal, all-out assault against my character, my integrity, my vocation. I was getting ready to preach the gospel – and the devil absolutely didn’t want me to do it. I reached out to a buddy; he helped me get my head screwed back on straight; then I got here, and lots of things were going wrong, and I *had* to pray. Hard. Fiercely. I prayed that God would banish the powers of darkness from this sanctuary, that light would shine, that God would give me the courage and the capacity to proclaim his message with clarity and boldness, that the devil would just *leave me alone* so I could do that which God was calling me to do. I didn’t learn how to pray like that in Sunday school, or in seminary. But one of the things I’ve been learning in the past few years is that prayer like that *works*. Warfare prayer in the name of Jesus *works*. *We have the power to banish the darkness*.

I got through worship. The sermon went great. And then the devil came back for me again. Throughout the next day I felt burdened, oppressed, bound with chains. Like every single thing I was trying to do was requiring extra effort. Like I couldn’t escape from the darkness. I was barely functional through the morning. I went for a run that afternoon. Usually that’s something I look forward to, but that day I had to *force* myself out the door, *force* myself over to the track, *force* myself to start my intervals. I could just *feel* the oppression, the heaviness, weighing down on me. Then I unleashed all my fighting skills against it – everything I’ve learned over the past few years from Christians far more skilled at this than I am. I prayed hard, *fiercely*, practically *bitterly*. “Get out of my head, Satan! Leave me *alone!*” Over and over again, out loud, practically *yelling* at the Enemy. Thankfully I had the track to myself; I’m not sure I would have had the courage to be so bold if other people had been there. And it worked. It totally worked. By the end of the workout I felt light, joyful, *free*. This was not just an adrenaline rush. I know what an endorphin high feels like, and this was not that. This was a freedom, a lightness of being, that was *spiritual* in nature. The Enemy let me go ... for a while.

Some of you may think this is far-fetched. I’m telling you: *this is real*. Spiritual attacks are real. I know numerous other pastors, counselors, and trusted Christian friends who would say the same thing. Not long ago one of them said to me, “I too face this attack from the devil. I too verbalize for him to flee as he is trying to bury me with doubt, fear, oppressive thoughts. What I do realize, like you, is that this happens most when I am on track with where God wants me.” *Evil doesn’t want us to follow God*.

Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. James wrote that nearly two thousand years ago. A lot of churches – and even seminaries – skip that line. But it’s true. Twenty centuries later, it’s still true.

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