

July 18, 2010 – First Baptist Church, Vancouver

Text: Matthew 4:1, 8-11 (12:22-29) 28:16-20

Title: “Evil and the Gospel”

Thank God for the Gospel! The Biblical word is “euangellion” from which we get the English words “evangel”, “evangelical”, “evangelize”. Gospel. It means good news. Not just good advice. Not that we do not need good advice. We do. And the Gospel gives it. Good advice like, “Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.” Good advice like, “Do not be anxious for tomorrow.” Good advice like, “Let no root of bitterness grow up in you.” Good advice like “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you.” Great good advice! If we could just live that good advice, the world would be transformed overnight. The problem is that the good advice is impossible to live without the good news. Which is why the NT never gives us any good advice without grounding it in good news.

I have good news for you today. Jesus of Nazareth has changed the way the universe goes together! Through His death, resurrection and ascension the “structures of reality” have been altered. And altered in the direction that “charms our fears and bids our sorrows cease,” as an old hymn puts it. Before Jesus dies on the cross and is raised from the tomb, reality is configured one way. After Jesus dies on the cross and is raised from the tomb, reality is configured in another way. When He comes again in all His glory, reality will be configured in yet another way!

Before the invention of television people lived one way. After the invention and proliferation of television people live another way. Before the internet the world went together one way. After the internet the world goes together in another way.

I suggested the past two Sundays that we look at reality with a capital “R” as a gigantic cobweb. And I suggested that we can give names to the various threads and strands that make up the cobweb. Names like water, air, fire, earth; names like gravity, electromagnetism, nuclear energy; and names like sin, evil, and death – the enemies of life. Before the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth, sin, evil, and death were woven into Reality one way. After the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth, sin and evil and death are woven into Reality in a different way. The structures of Reality have been altered. Forever. In the direction of setting captives free. Especially setting captives free from fear in the face of evil.

By the word “evil” I mean what the New Testaments means: more than human meanness and madness. By “evil”, I also mean “the evil one”, the personal embodiments of evil whom Jesus faces right at the beginning of His ministry. Before the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth, evil was present and at work in human life one way. After the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth, evil is present and at work in a different way. We are talking really good news!

In the texts we read from the Gospel according to Matthew, we are taken to two mountains, one before the cross and empty tomb, and the other after the cross and empty tomb. Before Mathew 4. Jesus on a mountain with the evil one. Satan, as Jesus calls him, claims that all the kingdoms

of the world, all the nations of the world, belong to him. And he offers to give the nations to Jesus if Jesus will simply worship him. Mountain. Nations. Give worship. After Matthew 28, Jesus is on a mountain again. Now with disciples. Making the cosmic claim: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me.” Jesus releasing His disciples to “go, make disciples of all the nations.” Mountain. Nations. Give worship.

Between the two mountain events, Matthew records many of Jesus’ liberating deeds – healing all kinds of sickness, freeing people from all kinds of demonic influence. And Matthew records Jesus’ own interpretation of the deeds in His parable about the strong man. Jesus says that for a long time a strong man has been holding humanity captive. But now a Stronger Man has come, has bound the strong man, and is plundering his house. Altered structures of Reality! The way the universe goes together has been changed. In the direction that frees us from the fear of evil.

Now ... I am keenly aware that what I am going to develop for the next 20 minutes of so, does not square with the prevailing world-view; I am aware that what I am going to develop is even offensive to the prevailing world-view. I am going to simply tell the story of two mountains. Many of you know it well. Some of you have never heard it. All of us need to know it.

So ... Go back to the first mountain. Matthew tells us that the devil showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, all the nations. And says to Jesus, “All these things I will give to You, if You fall down and worship me.” Luke records the additional claim, “for this dominion has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish” (Luke 4:6). “See them Jesus! All the kingdoms of the world: China, India, Rome and all her conquered kingdoms, Greece, Pergamos, Bithynea, Pontus, Egypt, Judea. See them Jesus! All the nations that rebel against Your Father (Ps. 2:1). All the nations of the world, Jesus. I hold them in my grip. They can all be Yours if You just fall down and worship me.”

Now, in order to understand this temptation, .. and therefore understand what happened between the two mountain events, we need to remember that this temptation on the first mountain takes place right after Jesus’ baptism.

What an experience that was for Him! At His baptism Jesus saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit of God descending upon Him in the form of a dove. And Jesus heard a Voice from heaven — the Father’s voice — saying, “They is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). It is important to notice that there are two parts to the Father’s speech: (1) “This is My beloved Son,” and (2) “With whom I am well pleased.” Both parts of the Father’s speech echo critical texts of the Old Testament.

The first part, “This is My beloved Son,” echoes Psalm 2. Psalm 2 is called “the Royal Psalm,” because in it God the Father addresses the Son ... to whom the Father gives all the nations of the world.

“Why are the nations in an uproar, and the peoples devising a vain thing! The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers take counsel together against Yahweh and His Messiah; (saying), ‘Let us tear their fetters apart, and cast away their cords from us!’ He who sits in the heavens laughs, Yahweh scoffs at them ... (and says), ‘But as

for Me, I have installed My King upon Zion, My hold mountain! (and the King says), 'I will surely tell of the decree of Yahweh.' He said to me, 'You are My Son, today I have begotten You. As of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, the very ends of the earth as Your possession' (Ps. 2:1-8).

Son. Nations. At His baptism Jesus knows that He is this beloved Son of God who comes to be God's anointed King over all the nations.

The second part of the Father's speech, "with whom I am well pleased," echoes the words of Isaiah 42. Isaiah 42, verses 1-4, is the first of four songs Isaiah records where Yahweh is singing about His Servant:

"Behold, My servant, whom I uphold: My chosen One in Whom My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations."

Servant. Nations. At His baptism Jesus knows that He is God's anointed Servant who comes for the sake of the nations. And Jesus knows what that will finally entail. For He knows that the songs of the Servant in Isaiah build upon one another, until they culminate in the fourth song, record in Isaiah 52 and 53.

"Behold, My Servant will prosper, He will be high and lifted up, and greatly exalted ... Kings will shut their mouths on account of Him" (Isaiah 52:13, 15).

And how will this Servant reach such a high and exalted place among the nations? Isaiah continues:

"He was despised and forsaken, a man of suffering and acquainted with grief ... All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but Yahweh has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him. He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth" (Isaiah 53:3, 6-7).

At His baptism Jesus accepts this two-fold call: (1) as the Father's Son anointed to be God's King over the nations, and (2) as God's Servant to redeem the nations by taking on the sin of the nations. At His baptism Jesus already knows that the nations will ultimately be given to Him as His inheritance. And He knows that He will only gain this inheritance by redeeming the nations through His substitutionary sacrifice. That is, Jesus knows He will gain the crown by going to the cross.

Now we see what is happening on the first mountain. "I will give You all the kingdoms of the world and their glory if You will fall down and worship me." Satan is offering Jesus a way to fulfill the first part of His baptismal call without having to fulfill the second part. Satan is offering Jesus a way to be King without having to be the Suffering Servant. Evil is offering Jesus a way to the crown that avoids the cross.

Very tempting!

“I have the nations in my grasp. I have peoples and governments in my grip. I will loosen my grip. I will relinquish control. I will transfer my authority over the nations to You. Just fall down and worship me. That’s all. You can set the captives free without the agony of the cross. The nations, Jesus! All of them. Yours. Just worship me.”

The question is, could Satan have delivered on the deal? That is, were the kingdoms of the world, the nations of the world, in his grip? In Luke’s version of the temptation, Satan claims the nations were “handed over” to him. By whom? By God? By God? Would the Living God have handed the nations of the world over to the power of evil?

The answer is no and yes. No, God would not and did not transfer ownership and sovereignty to the evil one. But God *has* given nations – and individuals – free choice. God honors the choices people make, and He justly allows the consequences of those choices. Whether we realize it or not, when human beings – individually or nationally – choose not to bow down and worship the Living God we inevitably fall under the influence and grip of evil. If we will not walk in the Light, God lets us live in the darkness we have chosen; God lets us fall under the deceptive spell of the prince of darkness. If we will not walk in Truth, God lets us experience the deception we have chosen and we fall into the web of the lord of lies.

Which means, we humans handed over the nations to the evil one. We did not mean to do it. No nation assembled and said, “Hey, let us go over to the Dark Side; let us hand ourselves over to Evil and Death.” Rather, individual after individual, nation after nation, chose not to live under the gracious Rule of the Living God. And thus unwittingly relinquished dominion to the evil one.

It is in this sense that Jesus calls Satan “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11). And it is in this sense that the apostle John can say “the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). To the extent that nations and individuals give in to disobedience and rebellion, to that degree humanity lies in the grip of evil.

And yet there is the larger truth. Although the Living God honors the free choice of nations and individuals, God is still on the throne of the universe. As the prophet Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, (after whom Saddam Hussein liked to fashion himself) “The Most High is ruler over the realms of humanity and bestows authority on whom He wishes” (Daniel 4:17, 25, 32).

Therefore, on the first mountain Satan was telling the truth. Yet true to his character he was not telling the whole truth. Satan *did have* a grip on the nations and could transfer his grip to Jesus. But Satan’s grip was not absolute. In his drive to usurp authority, Satan deceived himself about his own importance. He spoke and acted as though he were God. “I will give you the kingdoms of the earth.” I! He echoes the words of Psalm 2 where God says to the Son, “ask of Me (God the Father) and I will give You (God the Son) the nations.”

So inflated is Satan about his place in the structures of reality that he then says, “Worship me. Fall down and worship me.” I paraphrase: “As long as You have the nations, Jesus, does it really matter how You got them? I am not asking You to renounce Your Father. He does not even have to know! We can do this discretely, in private. After all, the private life of a king does not affect

whether or not he rules well. Right! You can have the nations now and avoid the cross.” ... And what would have been the consequences if the Son of God had given in? The world would be ruled publicly by Jesus but secretly by evil.

But Jesus did not give in to the temptation. And in that act saved the world. Jesus’ response was “instant indignation” (Everett Harrison). “Begone Satan! It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only.’” Him only. Jesus was not about to compromise His allegiance to His Father for *anything*, including getting the nations of the world. Jesus, in effect, says to Satan, “I will serve My Father only ... even if it means the cross.”

And in that moment the structures of reality changed. Evil’s place in the universe was altered. Evil had finally met its match. Which is why Jesus then leaves this first mountain and goes down into the valley to begin announcing what He calls the Gospel of God; “The time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15). “The time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15). Jesus begins to heal the sick and free the oppressed and cast out demons.

From that moment on *Jesus was in charge!* Oh, it did not always look like it. Indeed, it often looked as if He were the victim of evil. But the fact is, He was anything but a victim. He had won the victory in principle ... and was now on His way to winning it in fact!

On the first mountain, Jesus, as it were, tied Satan’s hands. Jesus could then begin to plunder the strong man’s house. “*Plunder.*” Jesus uses this specific word in His parable because according to Isaiah, that is what the Servant of God does. God says to the Servant, to the Suffering Servant, “I will allot Him a portion with the great, and He will divide the plunder with the strong” (Isaiah 53:12). From the moment Jesus refused Satan’s deal, Satan’s grip was weakened. So Jesus moved into Satan’s territory and began to “reduce to obedience” spirit powers and evil cosmic forces which He met on the scene. (Ernest Best, *Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Vol. 3*, p. 807).

At one point, Jesus sends out 70 disciples into towns and villages with His Gospel, “The Kingdom of God has come near.” The 70 return and tell Jesus everything that happened. And Jesus responds, “I saw Satan falling like lightning” (Luke 10:18). Every time anyone responds to the good news of the Kingdom ... Satan falls like lightning. The reign of evil was collapsing!

But the evil one did not give up. He kept trying to get Jesus to take the shortcut, to avoid the cross. At Caesarea Philippi, Peter confesses his belief that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah. Jesus then tells Peter that the Son of God who is the Son of Man, must go to Jerusalem and be crucified. Immediately Peter rebukes Jesus. “God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You.” God forbid it? God? This is the very thing God called Jesus to do at His baptism! Jesus turned to Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan!” (Matthew 16:23). For Jesus knew that the evil one was again tempting Him to bypass the cross.

Jesus continued to face that temptation. In the Garden of Gethsemane, on the night before going to the cross, Jesus wrestled with His baptismal call. “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me” (Matthew 26:39). “Is there any other way to win the nations? Is there any other way to

be King with being Servant? Is there a way to avoid the cross?" Jesus knew the answer. "Come, let us go," He said. And they did.

As we read the story we are struck by the fact that Jesus did not seem overwhelmed by what was taking place. He did not act like a victim of evil. Instead, as one scholar put it, "Jesus strides forward like a conquering king approaching His throne" (James Kalas, *The Real Satan*, p. 100). He walked right into the face of evil ... and let evil have its way with Him.

At the cross it looked as if Satan had won; it looked as if the way of the Servant had failed. Let me rephrase C.S. Lewis' paraphrase of what Satan said to Jesus on the cross: "You fool. You stupid fool. You wouldn't face reality, would You? You thought the meek would inherit the earth!? Ha, ha, ha. Did You really think You could free people from my grip in this weak way! Now I will kill You. Who then will rescue the world? Understand that You have given me the nations of the world forever!!" But that was not the case. For Satan did not know the power of the Gospel. The power of sacrificial love.

On the first day of the week, when the women went to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body, the tomb was empty! "He is not here," they were told; "He is risen, just as He said. Go get the others and go to the mountain" (Matthew 28:7). To the mountain? Yes. To the mountain!

And they went. And there they met Jesus alive! The grip of death had been broken! Evil had not won! And they worshipped Jesus.

And on the mountain Jesus gave His victory speech. Listen. His words change the way we understand Reality: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given *to Me*. Go, disciple the nations" (Matthew 28:18, 19). Do you hear Him? "All authority ... in heaven and on earth" To Me. He had fulfilled the role of Servant; now He could assume the role of King. Jesus now possesses legitimately what Satan offered deceitfully. (Edward Schweizer, *Matthew*, p.65).

"All authority." The nations of the world belong to Jesus! I know it sounds audacious to our post-modern ears. But it is the good news. The nations of the world are now the possession of the King with nail-scarred hands!

Oh, the forces of evil still seduce individuals, and corporations, and universities, and governments with their deceptive lies and their offer of power. And the forces of evil still tempt people to take the shortcut, to justify the means by the end, to use coercion and violence to maintain order and peace. But that is because they have not yet heard the Gospel. They have not yet realized that the death and resurrection of Jesus have altered the structures of Reality.

Two mountains. One before ... one after. One before the crucifixion and resurrection. One after the crucifixion and resurrection. Revealing the fact that the way the universe is configured has changed! And what does it all mean for us in our day? It means: We need no longer fear evil. "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. When you know the Gospel, you can say the words with even deeper assurance than David did: "I will fear no evil."

Yes, the battle still rages. The apostle Paul remind us: “*our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places*” (Ephesians 6:12). Ad we need to be alert to this fact. Church historian Richard Lovelace, observes: “Much of the churches’ warfare today is fought by blindfolded soldiers who cannot see the forces ranged against them, who are buffeted by invisible opponents, and respond by striking one another” (*Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, p. 18). Yes, the battle continues. But the good news is we are dealing with crippled powers. Richard Lovelace again: “In folk religion the posture of the Christian toward the forces of evil is defensive; in Scripture the church is on the offensive, and the blows it receives from Satan comes from a retreating enemy.” (p.136).

Like sin and death, evil is still here. Evil will not be totally annihilated until Jesus Christ comes in all His glory. But though evil is still here it is on a leash; our battle is with a defeated enemy. So, South African pastor, Desmond Tutu – whom I have quoted in another sermon, before he won the Nobel Peace Prize, could walk into the office of the person who enforced the policy of apartheid and say, “Mr. Minister, we must remind you that you are just a man. One day your name will be a faint scribble on the pages of history while the Name of Jesus Christ goes on forever.”

Missionary Mary Webster reminds us: “We do not work *toward* the victory, but *from* the victory.” We are not in a battle to bring the nations of the world under the rule of Jesus Christ. They already are! “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to Me.” The missionary enterprise is not to “make Jesus Lord of the nations.” He already is! As the Dutch politician Abraham Kuyper once said, there is no place on earth (or in heaven) over which Jesus cannot say, “That’s Mine.” Altered structures of Reality.

In light of what happened between these two mountains, we now have a clearer understanding of what Jesus means by “Go, disciple the nations.” He means, “Go, help the nations realize what has already happened and help them enter into the new Reality.” That is our job in the city.

Of all the Christian leaders I know, St. Patrick of Ireland understood this best. He really believed the Gospel ... and was used by Jesus Christ to bring about the transformation of an entire nation! Patrick was born in 385 AD. At the age of 16 he was captured by slave traders, and for 16 more years forced to tend sheep. For those 16 years he was exposed to cold and hunger and danger; he spent months alone in the mountains. Then when he was 32 years old, he had an encounter with the Lord of the nations ... who called Patrick to go to Ireland with the Gospel. Within 30 years, Ireland was almost completely converted! While the Roman Empire was moving from order to chaos, Ireland was moving from chaos to order. Not because a new superpower was imposing order ... but because of the liberating power of the good news.

In his book, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, Thomas Cahill explains why Patrick had such an impact on Ireland. Before Patrick came, Ireland was held captive to what Cahill argues was the most frightening world view an culture has ever known. In the old Irish mythology, dark forces ruled the world. Everywhere one turned, there were hidden traps and pitfalls. Taboos were developed to ward off these forces. But one never knew if the taboo would work ... because in the Irish mythology the powers kept shifting in shape. A god or goddess might first be a river,

then turn into a wave, and then into the sea, then into an ox, then into a hawk, and so on. (p. 128) Into all that instability and fear, Patrick came with the Good News. Patrick was not afraid of any of the dark forces because he knew the structures of Reality had been altered; even if the world be filled with dark forces, he knew they were defeated forces.

Jesus Christ defeated darkness on the cross, and thereby robbed the forces of evil of their authority. Satan was not lord of Ireland; Jesus was. Patrick's task was simply to declare the good news ... which he could do because he himself lived in the good news!

Within 30 years, within one generation, Irish slave trading ended. Murder and intertribal warfare ceased. Marriage became an honorable institution. There was no longer the need to keep the peace with a sword because the Irish began to believe what Patrick declared: evil no longer had authority. Jesus Christ does. In His name evil must give way.

Every day, St. Patrick went through the discipline of putting on what he called the "Breastplate"; that is, he clothed himself with the affirmation of the altered structures of Reality. Every day he said these now famous words:

I arise today
Through a mighty strength, the invocation of the Trinity,
Through belief in the threeness,
Through confession of the oneness
Of the Creator of Creation.
I arise today
Through the strength of Christ's birth with His baptism
Through the strength of His crucifixion with His burial,
Through the strength of His resurrection and His ascension,
Through the strength of His descent for the judgment of Doom.
I arise today
Through God's strength to pilot me:
God's might to uphold me,
God's wisdom to guide me,
God's eye to look before me,
God's ear to hear me,
God's word to speak for me,
God's hand to guard me,
God's way to lie before me,
God's shield to protect me,
God's host to save me
From snares of devils,
From temptations of vices,
From everyone who shall wish me ill,
Afar and anear,
Alone and in the multitude.
Christ to shield me today
Against poison, against burning,

Against drowning, against wounding.
Christ with me,
Christ before me,
Christ behind me,
Christ in me,
Christ beneath me,
Christ above me,
Christ on my right,
Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down,
Christ when I sit down,
Christ when I arise, Christ in the heart of every one who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of every one who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.”

(Cahill's translation, p. 116-118)

Patrick then entered the valley clothed in Good News.

So, too, you and I. We leave this place and go into our cities clothed with the Gospel. We go, not to bring Jesus Christ to the city; He is already there! We go, not to make Jesus Christ Lord of the city; He already is! We go to bring the city into the Light, into Reality with a capital “R”. By words of truth and grace, by deeds of mercy and power, we bring the city – the nations – into the “altered structures of Reality.”

Before the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth everything goes together one way. First mountain. After the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, everything goes together another way, in a way that sets captives free. Second mountain.

There is no reason to be afraid anymore! The Stronger Man has come. And He says, “It is all Mine now!”