

The Schemes of the Devil

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost: 1 Kings 2:1-4, 10-12; Psalm 121; Ephesians 6:10-20; St Mark 7:1-8, 14-16, 21-23. A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson at Knox Presbyterian Church on September 1, 1985.

The summer between my junior and senior year at college I read the complete tales of Narnia of which *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* is the first. Lewis opened my eyes to a world full of wonder, magic and mystery. Then I realized that the magical land of Narnia is very much like our own world. As I read the tales of Narnia I got a new grasp of the Christian message and its power to break the curse of sin from our world. The old and wonderful story of Jesus and his victory over Satan shines through these stories and makes it come alive again. I hope that all of you, no matter what your age, will commit the next five Sunday mornings to attending our very special Sunday School program where we'll view the animated version of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* and then go to our various classes to discuss it in the light of our Christian faith. Remember, it's for people of all ages and not just for children.

The message of our epistle lesson reminded me of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. Remember how Paul speaks of a struggle that's taking place in this world. He warns of the devils schemes. Now, my sermon can be summed up in two words:

- I. Danger
- II. Decision.

I. Danger. When Peter, Susan, Lucy and Edmund entered Narnia they discovered that Jadis the White Witch has overcome most of Narnia and cast a spell over it so that it's always winter but never Christmas. She has the magical power to turn all her enemies to stone. She's a master of

persuasion and deception. You say, "What does that have to do with the Gospel?" Well, *the New Testament teaches that behind all the dangers in our life, behind all the dark menaces that overshadow it, there really is a dark, mysterious, spellbinding figure at work.* Behind the temptations stands *the tempter*, behind all lies stands *the liar*, behind the terrorism, the dead and the wars and revolutions stands *the "murderer from the beginning."*

Fifty years ago, at the height of liberalism, a minister might have been embarrassed to talk about the prince of darkness. But in our time we've had far too much contact with demonic rulers and powers of this world. We're probably more aware of the evil going on in the world than ever before in history. We've seen how an alien spirit can take control of a nation and its rulers and change decent and reasonable people, driving them to brutalities, delusions of power, and fits of madness of which they never appeared to be capable before. How else can you explain how so many good Germans never smelled the flesh of burning men and women in the ovens of Buchenwald, Dachau, and Belsen. Year by year we've seen how science, that carries so much hope for destroying hunger, poverty, and disease, is sabotaged by an unseen hand so that research is diverted into the development of bombs, the flaming arrows of the evil one. It seems as though some invisible hand is passing an invisible cup of poison from nation to nation and throwing them into confusion.

The prince of darkness is so dangerous because it's a master of disguise. Sometimes the Devil goes about as a roaring lion looking very much like Aslan; very regal, very powerful and good. At other times it appears as an angel of light offering more light than what we have already in the Bible. Like Jadis, the white witch, it doesn't look evil. There are no horns, no cloven hoofs, no tail.

The prince of darkness is so dangerous because it's a master of persuasion. When the seducer tries to bring someone into its power, it doesn't say, "Come, let me teach you something evil; I'll show you a sin." If it were to begin its seduction in such a foolish way, our conscience would be shocked and we'd try to escape the temptation. But the Tempter would never begin in such a stupid way. Instead the Devil says, "Come, I'll teach you something interesting, I'll give you something pleasurable, something that will give you a glorious thrill and give you the chance to live to the full. You can be rich. You can be powerful. You can be popular at very little cost." Or it says, "You've a right to this thing. After all you've been cheated. You've been given a raw deal. You have a right to what they say isn't yours."

The Devil is so dangerous because it knows human psychology so well. The Serpent knows that the more we fear it the more under its power we come. When we have excessive fear of the devil and when we become preoccupied with its activities we become easy victims. We begin to blame the devil for all our sins and weaknesses. "The devil made me do it." But Jesus tells us, "For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly." Don't blame the devil for your sins. We pay the devil too much of a compliment and it loves to be blamed. It loves to take the credit for all the sinful and evil things we do on our own. The devil loves for people to believe that it has more power than it actually does. The Seducer loves it when we abdicate responsibility for what we do.

On the other hand, the Prince of Darkness can also turn disbelief to its advantage. Most of us have been heavily influenced by materialistic

thought. Everything there is is a result of impersonal matter, infinite time and limitless space. In a materialistic world there's no place for a devil or the demonic. It's neither rational nor material, and so it can't exist. The powers of darkness were so pervasive in Nazi Germany precisely because Germany was so enlightened, so civilized, so rational, so powerful that they thought there were no powers which they couldn't control if they'd just make up their mind to do so and would use their best scientific techniques.

11. So the Devil is dangerous because it's a master of disguise, it's a master of persuasion, it's a keen student of human nature, knowing how to turn excessive fear, on the one hand, or scepticism, on the other, to its own diabolical purposes. But if there is danger, God calls us to decision. God has given us weapons to protect us from the schemes of the devil and calls us to put them on, to stand our ground and to pray.

There's a scene in *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* where Father Christmas gave magical weapons to Peter, Lucy and Susan. God has also given us weapons. He's given us *truth*. There's something within us that knows when we're lying to others or to ourselves. God calls his people to put on the belt of truth. We are not to be people of the lie but people of the truth who can be truthful about ourselves as well as with others. God has also given us *righteousness*. That means, in part, that we're to arm ourselves with the knowledge of what's right and wrong. We're to take a stand for what is right and not remain silent. Someone has said that all it takes for the forces of evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing.¹ ^{He has given us faith. Learn to take the hand of Jesus. Learn to believe we need not stumble & fall.} God has also given us the Gospel of *peace*. The Gospel is the joyful proclamation that God has made peace with us. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. Peace is possible because Christ has

conquered Satan. Armed with the gospel of peace we have confidence in our spiritual conflicts. God has also given us *salvation* so that nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ, not even demons, nor any powers. Finally God arms us with his *Word*. Listen to his word in our Psalm for the day. "He will not let your foot slip-- he who watches over you will not slumber." His Word to Solomon is also his word to us, "Be strong, show yourself a man, and observe what the Lord your God requires: Walk in his ways, and keep his decrees and commands, his laws and requirements."

In this battle we don't stand alone. We stand beside Jesus and he stands at the right hand of God in kingly sovereignty. And because Christ is Lord even the satanic principalities and powers must serve him, and against their will carry out his gracious plans. However powerful the Devil is and however wiley his schemes the Lord God is more powerful and his purposes more sure. God has the Devil on a leash. Because we stand beside Jesus, the Tempter can bark and may frighten us but can't bite. The serpent's tail may rattle, but his head is already crushed. So let us come to the Lord's table resolving to "be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power." Let us come to the Lord's table with a decision to *put on* the armor God has given us, to *take our stand* against the devil's schemes and *pray* in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.

Let us pray: O God, the author of peace and lover of concord, to know you is eternal life and to serve you is perfect freedom: Defend us, your servants, in all assaults of the enemy; that we, surely trusting in your defense, may not fear the power of the adversary; through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

as long as we put on our armor & stand, & pray.