

In my daughter's room this week I came across a yellow arm band with the word "Jude" on it. It took me back to a 1994 family trip to Berlin, Germany to visit friends we'd made when living there years before, when my she was an infant. By this visit she was 13. A year before, she'd been moved by reading Anne Frank's diary and developed a deep compassion for victims of the Holocaust. That's why I shouldn't have been surprised when, after we'd visited a memorial to those executed by the Nazis. She said, "Dad, could take me to Auschwitz?" How could I say, "No?" So, because we had little time left in Berlin, took a night train, which would allow us to spend the day there and then take another night train back.

After a long night in a crowded compartment, we got to Auschwitz. It was overwhelming. Its immensity underscored the scale of the evil it represents. So did piles of glasses, shoes, and luggage. But what drove that home most powerfully was a room full of pictures of children, each a head and shoulder shot, taken after they'd arrived, been spared immediate death, and designated, instead, to be worked to death.

There was one young girl, about 10 years old, whose image still haunts me. She had short dark hair and big dark eyes; she was looking up toward the camera, trying to be strong, it seemed, but her eyes were full of terror. More than any symbol of depravity I'd seen, her eyes made the evil personal and real for me. Anything, person, people, or power, that could make a child feel that way, look that way, had to be evil.

Evil is something we don't talk about much in the church these days. Seems we're afraid to.

It seems too negative. Too negative for those into what's been called, the "Prosperity Gospel," which says the good news is that Jesus has come to bring joy and prosperity. So we should be upbeat, joyful, and not think about things that make us feel bad.

It seems too judgmental. We may recognize that people make mistakes, even do bad things, but we attribute it all to lack of information, opportunity, understanding. The idea of evil as a power, a power out to control us and the world, a power that seeks to destroy life, seems so harsh, judgmental, old-fashioned.

But negative, unjoyful, harsh, judgment, though it may seem, the true gospel (as opposed to the prosperity one), calls us to see the reality of evil. Yes, "gospel" means "good news." So, how can the "good news" call us to look at something so bad? Because the good news is about something more profound than being saved from lack of success or sad feelings; it's about being saved from something terrible, something which possessed and controlled us, from which we can be set free only at great cost – the power of sin and death. And it's about being saved for something much deeper, more profound, and holy, than success - eternal life, a relationship of love and joy, with God and others, now and for eternity.

We begin to see the cost Jesus bore to bring this salvation in today's scripture, his baptism and temptation in the wilderness. He comes to the Jordan, is baptized by John, the heavens are torn open, the Spirit descends, and a voice from heaven says, "You are my Son, my beloved, with you I'm well pleased."

In his baptism Jesus is claimed by God and dedicates himself to God. That begins his saving work. But it begins his saving work, not only because God claims him and he dedicates himself to God, but because that claiming and dedication mean that he must face temptation and evil. It begins his saving work because it leads, immediately, to his confrontation with evil, the power from which we all need to be saved.

Baptism begins his saving work in us, too. In it we are claimed by God and dedicate ourselves to God. That's what establishes our identity as Jesus' followers, marks our dying to an old life and birth to a new one, our transition from one world to another, where Jesus, not some false God, is Lord of our life, and we

live in the freedom he gives, not bondage to some other power - the power of evil, in particular. That's why one of the questions of baptism and later of confirmation is, "Do you renounce the powers of evil and desire the freedom of new life in Christ?" It means transferring our identity and loyalty to him, him alone. Being claimed by God and dedicating ourselves to God means renouncing the old powers that have ruled. That creates conflict because they still want to rule our lives and the world. That's why what happened to Jesus ought to warn us – we'll be tempted and tried by the powers of evil, powers that want to turn us from the holy identity and purpose we've chosen.

Look at what happens to Jesus immediately after his baptism! He was "thrown!" That's right! The literal word is "thrown out," by the Spirit, into the wilderness. While he's there he's tempted by Satan and confronted by "wild beasts." The "wild beasts" are the shadow side of reality, the deep, dark chaotic evil that rises up to challenge us. But not before they challenged Jesus.

That challenge comes in the form of temptation. It shouldn't surprise us. Commitment means conflict; commissioning means struggle. But we may wonder, "What kind of God praises Jesus as 'my Son, the Beloved,' and then 'throws him out' into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan?"

It may seem that God uses harsh means to bring us salvation. But it's a sign of the gravity of what God's up against: the power of evil. Jesus must sort out who he is, what he's about, before he begins his ministry – which is about defeating that power, setting us free from its grip. If he's not clear and totally convicted he may be turned from that holy purpose, and be seduced, won over, made to serve, the very power he's come to break. Baptism doesn't exempt Jesus from being tested by evil, it leads to it!

But though God permits temptation, Satan is the one who does it. As in the beginning, in Genesis, the tempter enters the scene to do his deceitful, demonic work.

Until about 200 years ago, God's people had no problem conceiving of a real tempter, the Devil, Satan. They knew Satan to be real, personal, and dangerously charming and enticing. But then, with the rise of rationalism, Satan was "demythologized." But the baby was thrown out with the bathwater: with the loss of Satan we also lost sin. Evil was reduced from sin to unhealthiness: maladjustment, unenlightened acts. The gospel of God's kingdom was replaced by a very human gospel of progress; whose article of faith was that evil was diminishing over time. But that gospel of progress collapsed in the 20th century. Totalitarianism, holocaust, genocide, weapons of mass destruction, endless war, and now the destructiveness of our selfish, arrogant rape of creation, made evil's reality undeniable.

All this real evil has forced theologians to re-mythologize the concept of Satan, whether as a literal, cosmic, personal being, or as a symbol of that supra-personal evil beyond us. It doesn't matter how we conceive of Satan, whether as an actual being or a supra-personal power. It's not the source of the temptation that's the issue, but the fact that there is temptation, that we succumb to it, and that once it has its grip on us, we are powerless. That's why Jesus taught us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

Just after his temptation, in his Jesus' first public act of ministry, Jesus again battles the demonic, casting out a demon, a demon who recognizes who he is, long before anyone else does. Yes, Satan is the tempter. What does Jesus say when Peter tells him that there's no need for him to suffer and die? Jesus seeing that Peter is tempting him away from his true calling, so he says, "Get behind me, Satan."

When God is at work, the power of evil moves into action. Later in Mark's Gospel, there will be times when no one recognizes who Jesus is, except for the demons. "Get out of here, Jesus of Nazareth, I know who you are!" they scream at Jesus. The forces of evil know their enemy when they see him.

If only the forces of good saw their enemy as clearly.

It's not always easy or obvious. As C. S. Lewis noted, "It is the policy of the devil to persuade us there is no devil." But to paraphrase Genesis, "sin is always lurking at the door. If we deny its reality, it is all the more likely to get the upper hand, and, by its growing control over us, become ever more dangerous.

Today's Gospel reminds us that Jesus has come, Jesus needed to come, precisely because of the reality of evil. He came, he needed to come, to break its power, because we could not. He came to set us free from its grip, because we couldn't do it alone. He came not only to be our friend, our comforter, and our guide but also our comrade in arms in those situations when we stand face-to-face and must go toe-to-toe with the enemy. But in order to receive that great and powerful help that he offers, we must first recognize that there is an enemy with whom we must stand face-to-face and against whom we must go toe-to-toe.

When you must enter enemy territory – places of injustice, bigotry, or hate, of subtle sowers of discord, mask wearers, smooth, charming masters of deceit, know that Jesus has invaded it before you. You don't go alone. He's with you. He's done battle with these powers, and won, and with him, you can be victorious, too.

If the only word we have for the world, is one that's sunny, upbeat, bright, cheerful, and nice, then we may have "a line" that will sell, but we don't have the good news, don't have the whole story of who Jesus is, the story of his mission to overcome evil with the power of selfless love, don't have the hope of the world.

The good news is not that evil doesn't exist, nor that it has no power, nor that all we have to do is learn to be nicer. The good news is that in the face of the stark and dreadful reality of evil, in spite of its awesome deadly power, in spite of our modern delusions that all we have to do is be positive and nice, which only grant it more power, God has acted to end its reign, to free us from its grip, so we need not live in either fear or denial of it. God has come to us in Jesus, who from the beginning faced both its slick and deceitful charm, and its destructive deadly power, and overcame it - overcame it, finally, ultimately, at great cost, by sacrificing himself, humbling himself, becoming despised and weak, for us. The good news is that through his sacrifice we've been shown a power greater than evil, a power for life - the power of God's rule. As Desmond Tutu said, "Goodness is stronger than evil. Light is stronger than darkness. And the Victory is ours in Jesus Christ!

Can you hear the good news in today's Gospel for the first Sunday of Lent?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you love us at close range.

You come to us as we are, in the world that we have.

Although you bring us abundant benefits and blessings,
...something about you also evokes resistance and rejection.

The demons look at you and recognize in you an adversary.

They knew, from the first, that you were not only about blessing us and loving us
...but also about the defeat of those hostile powers of sin and death that enslave us.

The demons knew that you were out to defeat all that keeps us from being who you intend for us to be.

Lord, it can be hard, but we thank you for the wilderness portions of our lives.

We thank you when we have no choice but to rely on you to sustain us,
...and upon the example of your creation and your stains to show us the way.

Lead us, so we may endure when there is less, abide deprivation, and triumph in the face of want.

Help us distinguish between what we want and what we need.

These things we pray in a spirit of gratitude and praise.

We pray for the lonely, struggling, and suffering who are going through wilderness times,
...that they too might be ministered to by angels,

We pray for the victims of injustice, for those cast out or cast off, for the forgotten, the distressed,
...and the misunderstood,

We pray for prisoners, that they might know through our prayers and our actions
...that all are part of the human community and the family of God,

We pray for victims, that we might with your help and your Spirit, work together for healing,
...the restoration of security, and the renewal of hope,

We pray for these, and for those dear to our hearts, we offer up to you now,

For all who are in need of our prayer, we who we fail to remember now, we also pray.