

## *Spiritual Contests*

Isaiah 65: 1-9

Luke 8: 26-39

We spent the last two weeks talking about the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, fulfilling Jesus' promise to provide an ongoing presence for his disciples. What few will talk about meaningfully is how this reflects the cosmology of Jesus' thinking, and indeed the cosmology of many in Jesus' time. I've talked about this before, but it is a difficult concept for moderns to comprehend. We simply don't talk about cosmology which makes the subject problematic from the start. Even a dictionary definition won't be helpful. And no, it isn't **cosmetology**, a whole different topic.

A cosmology refers to the component parts that comprise an understanding of living, dynamic powers that are experienced. For moderns, this tends to be highly rational and focused on the worldly, even for those who have a religious faith in a Higher Power. That there is a dual dimension to existence that reflects spiritual powers as well as earthly powers is not typical for the modern worldview or cosmology. Yet I would argue that such a dual dimension of spiritual and worldly among us is warranted, and even helpful in understanding what is going on around us. It was key to the perspective of 1<sup>st</sup> century figures like John the Baptist, Jesus, and Paul, for instance.

The closest moderns may get, and rather unhelpfully at that, is attributing evil to Satan. In their mind, Satan is part of the spiritual/worldly cosmology, not of this worldly existence, but very much influencing it. I say 'unhelpfully' because Satan turns into a catch-all term for anything that goes wrong. It's rather lazy and does nothing to clearly identify the evil being experienced, often confusing routine problematic occurrences with some evil scheme. 'No, it isn't Satan; that's just life,' or 'that's just *you*.' It's a very thin, flat, convenient cosmology that projects issues onto some figure without any meaningful impact or understanding. Besides, if Satan were such an important figure, you might ask why this key player is so rarely mentioned in scripture. Just sayin'.

I've mentioned before the excellent work of Walter Wink who noticed how the letters to the churches in the early chapters of Revelation are addressed to the **angel** of the church, not to individuals or even to the church itself. These letters in Revelation are dictated by the Son of Man, by the Lord. They are evaluations of the church's faithfulness and witness. At issue is whether the churches are living out their spiritual calling in their worldly affairs. You can see how permeable the spiritual and earthly are for each other, not at all the sharp kinds of distinctions we might make separating the spiritual and worldly. For some, their worldly presence seems excellent, but this spiritual calling-to-account reveals their weaknesses and their need to repent, to change and correct themselves. You could see how the worldly and the spiritual are seen together, not apart.

Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit to be Jesus' ongoing presence with his disciples, as we saw last week, recognizes that they will be in contests and conflicts, spiritual and worldly, and they will need the Counselor, the Advocate, his Holy Spirit to meet those

challenges. He has promised not to abandon them to the kinds of contests that Jesus knew and understood, but with which they remained unfamiliar.

This dual dimension of the spiritual intertwined with the worldly is also what's in play when we hear about the unfaithfulness of God's people who lend their devotions to other gods of other peoples. It is not simply the human-sounding jealousy of God that caused the offense; that actually sounds quite petty. The affront is that another agenda besides God's has been given credence. As this agenda is pursued, God's agenda is ignored, or has been disregarded as being not as important, not as attractive, not as powerful, not as helpful, or not as convenient as other gods.

The scripture selection from Isaiah 65, in Third Isaiah, during the period following the return from the Babylon exile, deals with this spiritual problem. Having returned after several generations in Babylon, we know that some returning may have adopted aspects of Babylonian culture which includes some of their gods. The people may still have doubts about this God who had allowed their defeat in battle, sanctioned the razing of Jerusalem and the killing of tens of thousands, and then sent his own people into exile for fifty years. They may be asking if this is the kind of God who deserves my devotion, or are their alternatives.

Judging from Isaiah 65, they have indeed found alternatives. It begins with the sad account of God saying 'Here I am! Here I am!' to God's people who weren't calling out for him. Turned toward other spiritual powers and their promises, they have no real interest in God. They have abandoned their covenant with God, yet God has remained faithful to them.

The text goes on to say: *All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations — a people who continually provoke me to my very face, offering sacrifices in gardens and burning incense on altars of brick; who sit among the graves and spend their nights keeping secret vigil; who eat the flesh of pigs, and whose pots hold broth of impure meat; who say, 'Keep away; don't come near me, for I am too sacred for you!' Such people are smoke in my nostrils, a fire that keeps burning all day.*

God's people have been quite self-indulgent in their spiritual license. The line: *offering sacrifices in gardens and burning incense on altars of brick* obviously references rituals to other gods while those who *sit among the graves and spend their nights keeping secret vigil* are mocked for seeking life direction among the dead. Then it gets worse as flagrant violations of the ban against pig meat are called out, not only eating it but keeping the fat and other parts for making broth that contaminates everything else eaten. God isn't finished, finally mocking the self-absorbed spiritual self-importance of obnoxiously pious ones who say: *'Keep away; don't come near me, for I am too sacred for you!'* The whole thing has God incensed: *Such people are smoke in my nostrils, a fire that keeps burning all day.*

God's judgment is next, of course. God is not playing second fiddle to other gods and their spirits, and God is not going to tolerate the dismissal of God's will by God's

people. But the judgment is quite restrained. If only some of God's people are faithful, then those faithful shall not be rejected from God's promise and God's covenant. The text says: *I will not destroy them all. I will bring forth descendants from Jacob and from Judah those who will possess my mountains; my chosen people will inherit them, and there will my servants live.*

We see in this Isaiah passage the competition, the spiritual contest between the gods in the world who would lead God's people astray with useless promises, empty rituals, and vain ideas of their righteous self-importance. The spiritual is exerting its influence on the worldly, luring God's people away from truth, righteousness, and justice. Instead, it leads to caring for themselves in self-indulgence, ignoring the social covenant to live according to God's will for peace, equity, and new life.

The same happens today, only it is more difficult to discern because the churches and its leaders generally do a lousy job of presenting God's will and the powerfully different way of new life in the Kingdom that Jesus taught. This weakness that avoids talking about and valuing the radical demands of Jesus' Kingdom path has allowed spiritual corruptions to hold undue sway. At bottom, such corruptions are no different from garden sacrifices, burning incense, consulting the dead, and thinking that your self-righteousness puts your beliefs beyond all others. Only preachers get to do that.

Let's consider Luke's story when Jesus faces a demon-possessed man. First off, the place is Gerasa, a town in the Decapolis, ten cities that were allied with Rome. The cities and the region were often avoided by Jews since its population is mostly Gentile with many Romans and Hellenistic Greeks living there. Again, Jesus has stepped out of bounds in his ministry.

Imagine an incredibly fearful visage, someone who is not only avoided, but feared. He is reckless, crazy, unpredictable, and violently dangerous. He wore no clothes, didn't live in a house, but skulked around the tombs.

The man (or his demon) meets Jesus screaming, *What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the most high God? I beg you, don't torture me.*

Jesus gets recognized immediately. Notice that his cosmological status is referenced, pointing to a spiritual battleground.

Jesus wants to know about the demon. Having the demon's name enables Jesus to recognize what he faces and deal with it appropriately. It's an important point for us. We need to **name** our fears, our challenges, our doubts, our sinfulness when we find them. We need to name the idols, gods, and powers that influence our lives. We must name them if we're ever to stand faithfully above their power to control, hinder, and void the promise and blessing of God for us.

The demon's name is "Legion." No one is named "Legion" in scripture except this demon. "Legion" symbolically refers to the large Roman military force of 6-10,000 soldiers. People were quite familiar with "Legion." "Legion" happened to rebellious

regions, disobedient towns, and independent uprisings. “Legion” was the brutal projection of the Empire’s power. “Legion” comes out of its camp and delivers its deadly horror wherever it’s needed. To find “Legion” among the tombs is the perfect place for him.

We learn that no human power can control “Legion,” not chains, not shackles, not guards. Yet when Jesus confronts “Legion,” the demons beg for leniency. Surrendering quickly before the spiritual power of Jesus, they fear torture (a “Legion” specialty) and they fear the abyss of annihilation. Yes, now the demons’ **own** fears are revealed. Exposed and vulnerable now, they bargain and strike a deal.

They plead to be sent into a herd of pigs. This is no accident either; pigs are unclean for Jews. Pagans and Romans ate pork freely. (By the way, the dead are unclean for Jews, too.)

Cast into the herd of pigs, they somehow run off a cliff and into a lake, killing the pigs and the demons with them. The problem is that there is no lake and there are no cliffs, **none** in Gerasa – a lake and any cliffs are over 30 miles away. Clearly this is a **symbolic** story.

Jesus affirms the sovereignty of God and faith in God over what is fearful, threatening, powerful, oppressive, etc. The vicious and violent spirit of the worldly Roman Empire is no match for the spirit power of Jesus.

As the report went about, people came to see this man, now in right mind, fully clothed, very normal. The peoples’ response was ... **overwhelming fear**. If the demons were intimidating, if “Legion” inspired fear and dread, then Jesus who commanded the demonic powers and destroyed them must be feared **even more than** “Legion.” However, the people show no awareness that the rule of the Kingdom of God is based on love, grace, and new life, on justice, equity, and peace.

This is not about healing a **naked nut job** who terrorizes a cemetery. It is about the spiritual power of God for the faithful, overcoming even the greatest worldly power, the mighty Roman Empire.

The Holy Spirit is the spiritual power of disciples today to faithfully confront the worldly powers hostile to God’s Kingdom and God’s people. However, if we cannot accept the existence and influence of those powers, and discern those powers accurately, then they run free. They wreak havoc on our lives and on our society. The faithful among God’s people are spiritually empowered to do amazing things, but if we don’t understand the power given to us, then the Kingdom cannot move forward.