

November 22, 2015  
**“Who We Wish We Could Be”**  
Galatians 5:16-23  
Dr. David Renwick

In the past couple of weeks in our Sunday morning sermons we've been thinking about the presence of God, about experiencing God, about knowing God, about the difference God makes in our lives, creates in our lives, when God is no longer merely an abstraction of theological thought or an idea, but becomes a living breathing presence within our lives. In fact when Jesus defined eternal life (John 17:3) he said this: *“This is eternal life”* – Not just that you go to Heaven when you die but – *“that they know Thee, the one true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”* He defines eternal life as being in a relationship with the living God. Not just knowing about God, but knowing God directly.

So we've been thinking about the presence of God and experiencing God. And in a sense the rubber meets the road – this experience of God adds up to something real or doesn't add up to anything much at all – when we come to a time of difficulty, when we come to a time of crisis, when all hell breaks loose as it has done, or so it seems for many of us, in the past few months, and in the past 10 days in particular.

So we find ourselves crying out, not just abstractly, as in “What are we to think? What are we to do? How are we to live our lives?” But we find ourselves crying out personally to God himself, “God, where are you now? What do you want us to think? How do you want me to act? Who do you want me to be? – especially in the face of what we have seen recently:

- Especially in the face of intractable civil wars where the choices only seem to be bad choices, between oppression on the one hand or full-blown anarchy on the other hand.
- Especially in the face of millions of refugees some of whom may well be terrorists, as some would suggest?

If I were a terrorist I suppose I would join the refugees to gain access to places which I might not otherwise be able to enter. I have no doubt that they are present in the vast numbers. Indeed, I think there's a genuine concern here. But, for all that, the vast majority of refugees, in fact millions of them, whether in camps in Jordan or Turkey, or moving across Europe, are just like you and me: mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers and children and grandchildren and grandparents seeking life in the face of death

- Especially in the face of terrorism that is deadly, that willy-nilly kills hundreds of people and may, if the videos are right, come to our own shores, into our own city;
- and especially in the face of religion run amuck. Radical Islam exploited for evil just as (we need to remind ourselves) our own Christianity has been exploited for evil from time to time.

Think of the 16th century and the cruelties in the name of Christ perpetrated in the Inquisition; or think of those who in the past century have used Christianity to defend apartheid or to defend lynching by the Ku Klux Klan, many of whom were good faithful churchgoing people.

So the questions are numerous and poignant and pressing and complex and personal and religious. Where are you now Lord? How do you want us to think? What do you want us to do? Who do you, in this time, want us to be – as individuals, as Christian individuals? as a community, as a church? and as citizens of a nation that we love? Lord what do you have to say?

Of course it would be silly or arrogant to think that in the next 15 minutes I could give to you the definitive answer to all those questions, or even to think that there really is one definitive answer to all those questions; as if there were just one answer from God that fits every situation and every realm of existence. I for one do not believe that to be the case. What I do believe is that there are profound Christian principles that we cannot ignore, and that they are to decisively inform our thinking; yet, what I also believe is that a good, forthright, prayerful Christians think about those principles in the light of the issues of their day, they will almost always assess them and respond to them in ways that are different.

The Christian response of an individual, for example, on any issue -- what I need to think or do in my own individual life -- is almost certainly quite a different thing from the Christian response that a community like the church may need to consider. And the Christian response as citizens of a nation, and the response of a nation itself, are going to differ as well.

The church, for example, has not being given the right or the authority to use force (“wield the sword” as the Scripture would put it in Romans 13). But from a Reformed theological and Presbyterian point of view I certainly agree with the apostle Paul that the state has been given that authority, the right to use force – which means the decisions that are going to be made by the church and by the State will necessarily differ (the Declaration of Barmen in our Presbyterian Church USA constitution expounds some of these differences).

So in general, I do not believe that there is one solitary Christian answer to the great issues of life, but, rather, there are fundamental principles, foundational principles which should affect the way we think, the way we act, the way we respond, who we are and who we become, especially in the face enormous difficulty, as at such a time as this.

This morning, then, what I want us to do is to think briefly about just one of these foundational principles, one that I hope will help and influence what you think, how you respond as a faithful follower of Christ respond to our present situation. And the principal that I want us to think about has to do with (1) the grip of fear and (2) the power of evil and, by way of contrast (3) the power of the Gospel.

The Power for Evil: The fact is that for me at least, and I think for many –in the good times (and we in this nation experience good times a lot of the time, far more than most people on the

face of the earth) the fact is that we tend to forget that from the beginning of the story to the end, from Genesis to Revelation is the Bible tells a story about a struggle, and not merely a struggle but a battle, between good and evil: between a goodness that is really good (that is empowered by sacrifice and by love), and an evil that is really evil which (like the dementors in Harry Potter, and like the Capitol of Panem in the Hunger Games) will suck the life out of everything and everyone until all that is left is death.

It's strange to me how truthful secular movies can be as they return to these themes again and again, as if it's inescapable.

The trouble is, though, that most of the time a mask is placed on the face of evil and we live in a murky world of gray most days, where we are tempted to think that evil is, well, not quite so bad after all.

And it's only once in a while that the mask comes off and we see evil for what it is.

We see it for example in the slaughter of World War I, or the Holocaust of World War II, or the genocide of Stalin's Ukraine, or Cambodia, or the Balkans, or Rwanda, and then now – in the events of recent days, the things that we've been watching and seeing on television, and in the complexity of it all. And we're forced to wake up to the truth that the battle is in fact real, and is actually going on, whether we see it or not, every single day in one way or another, not only on the grand stages of the world but also in the dark corners of our personal lives.

In the Bible this battle between good and evil on a personal level is sometimes called the “war within,” or the war between the flesh and the spirit. So the apostle Paul writes to the Galatians he contrasts human activities or works characterized by the flesh on the one hand and the Spirit on the other.

Now let me say a word about this phrase, “the works of the flesh.” When we hear of “flesh” in a moral context these days we tend to think immediately of sins relating to sexuality. But when Paul speaks about flesh, to be sure sexual sins are included; but to Paul, “flesh” refers to all human life in the body whenever it is lived without God; life in the body (which is good in itself) where God is not in charge or control. So he writes this,

*“Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication impurity licentiousness idolatry sorcery enmities, (the kinds of things which break down human relationships) strife and jealousy and anger and quarrels and dissensions and factions and envy and drunkenness and carousing. Those who do such things,”* says the apostle, *“will not inherit the kingdom of God,”*

Whereas, by contrast, when God is present, and the battle is waged and God is fighting with us, for us, and in us, God's presence brings to the surface of our lives “fruit” that heals relationships, like *love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and generosity and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control.”*

The battle is real the Scriptures say: it's real on the international and on the national scale, and it's real on the personal and private scale as well. The perniciousness of this war on the

private scale for me is best described by Theodore Dostoevsky's words in his Notes from the Underground. The narrator asks this question (condensed):

“Tell me this, why does it happen that at the very, yes, at the very moments when I am most capable of feeling every refinement of all that is ‘sublime and beautiful’ it would, as though of design, happen to me not only to feel but to do such ugly things; actions that all perhaps commit but which, as though purposely, occurred to me at the very time when I was most conscious that they ought not to be committed.

The more conscious I was of goodness and of all that was ‘sublime and beautiful’ the more deeply I sank into my mire . . . and the more ready I was to sink into it altogether. At first, in the beginning, I did not believe it was the same with other people and all my life I kept this fact about myself a secret. I was ashamed . . .”

But now, he implies he’s come to the realization that it's true of all of us. Not just of some. The battle is waged in every single life.

So the inconvenient and unsettling truth is that the war between good and evil personally and publicly, however masked, is always real; and times like these recent days and months are simply stark and painful reminders of this pervasive and cosmic truth.

Though of course, on the other hand, what is just as real and true (and ultimately more real and true) and what we, as followers of Jesus Christ, must allow to enter our lives to transform the way we think about who we are and who we want to be, – what is just as true is the good news of the Gospel, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ does not merely stand afar off as the battle rages, as if God were in the director’s box watching a game of football from high up in the stands, far away, as we wage this war and this battle all by ourselves. The truth of the gospel is that God joins us in the middle of the fight and uses all his power, including that subversive weapon of sacrifice and love, to bring evil to a full and a final end.

The symbol, the sign above all others, that evil loses and that God wins (no matter what it looks like in time and space) is the empty cross of Jesus Christ, which points to both the crucifixion and, in its emptiness, to the resurrection. The cross of Jesus Christ, his crucifixion, where evil does its worst, driving the best human being who ever lived, the sinless son of God, to his death. An act of gross (that’s too small a word) injustice, the perpetration of senseless evil without limit, in which the devil says “I win, you lose” but he is proven wrong! The cross of Jesus Christ where God, having suffered death in the death of Jesus rises from the grave and says, “No! I win, you lose, the battle is not yours but mine; life triumphs over death and your days, dear devil, are numbered.”

And added to the symbol of the cross telling us of God’s victory, the story that tells us above all other stories that God is not only “the winner,” but that God is “with us,” right here and now in the battle, is the story of Christmas that we will hear again over the next few weeks. The story of God’s incarnation in the person of Jesus. Sometimes it's good to take a story out of context

and to hear it afresh – because this is the story that reminds us above all others that God has freely chosen to be close by, really with us is.

This is the story that tells us of God’s willingness to step into our world, inside our world, without obligation or necessity, but simply out of love. This is the story that tells us that God steps into a particular slice of history – into a world where people are homeless (like Mary and Joseph), where babies are slaughtered (as Herod wanted to do with the infants in Bethlehem), a world where families flee for their lives (as Mary and Joseph did to Egypt) at the mercy of forces beyond their control (both Herod and Caesar).

So what we believe because of the incarnation is that God’s promise to be with us is not merely as a casual word, but as a deep commitment, born of costly experience, from one who knows what it’s like to live on earth, no matter where we are and what we face. As if God says, *“Wherever you are, whatever you’re experiencing, I have been there, I really have, and this experience marks who I am for all eternity, the one on whom you can rely. With you, here, – and, by the way, I win, the battle is ultimately won.*

Which is surely why the message of the angel at Jesus’ birth, to the shepherds and to us, is primarily and powerfully the simple message of these two words: **“Fear not!”** Don’t be afraid!

- Not that there is no evil lurking around –these are not words of naïveté. And certainly our Reformed heritage would not allow us to be naïve. We believe that there is a time and place for the use of force. We do believe that.
- Not that we can drop our guard and ignore the horrors of the world around about us. The battle continues. It really does. The best way to think of God’s victory is to think of World War II and the relationship between D-Day and VE Day (Victory in Europe day): a period where the war was effectively on, the outcome never in doubt, but the skirmishes, very real and deadly (including the Battle of the Bulge), continued. This is the way the world is.

But the angel knew that the battle ultimately had been won. That the incarnation and the cross, Christmas and the resurrection, signaled a new day, a new way of thinking that, if true, must drive out crippling fear forever, in public and in private. So that when we think about this world – with its Caesars and Herods, with its homelessness and powerlessness, and with its injustices – that fear must never again be the primary motivating factor.

Albert Camus (or somebody summarizing Albert Camus’s, The Plague) says this:

*Fear is absorbed and communicated like poison or leprosy. Once contaminated, we transmit fear involuntarily, unwittingly, from eye to eye and mouth-to-mouth.*

So the angel says to us, to the shepherds and to you and me with a booming voice: don’t let it happen! DO NOT LET IT HAPPEN. But instead “from eye to eye and mouth-to-mouth” we need to be controlled by the news, the good news, at the heart of all existence that **“Though there is a battle, God wins; and even in the battle God is here.”** Live by this faith in the gospel and not by fear.

And when we do that, when we take this to heart as the foundation for our lives we at least will have a fighting chance to think clearly and to pray clearly, about all the other issues too:

Whether we address them as individuals, what does this mean for my life?

Or as Christians within the body of Christ the church, how is the church supposed to respond?

Or as citizens of a great nation: how are we as Christians to play our part within the society in which we live?

And when we do that, when we think clearly and prayerfully and when fear is not at the ground of our being, but when gospel-good-news, the victory of God and the presence of God are alive for us, – then we have a chance, we have a chance, of becoming, being and remaining the people we want to be; that we long to be; and that God longs for us to be.

So for example just to give one brief example, with respect to the issue of refugees and immigration in a day of terrorism – and I would put those two things together, they are intermingled whether we want them to be or not – when we think of refugees and immigration in days of terror, I would echo what I said earlier: I certainly do not have a quick and easy Biblical solution for the situation that so many face. But what I do know is this . . . as someone who believes that the Bible is the word of God and that Jesus is my Lord and Savior

What I do know is this: that Jesus told us to “welcome the stranger” and he did so with the threat of judgment that when we miss the stranger we miss him for all eternity (Matthew 25).

And what I do know is this: that over 50 times in the Old Testament Scripture Israel was commanded by God *to remember refugees and widows and orphans*. In fact in the 27th Chapter of Deuteronomy the whole issue of widows and orphans rises to a climax when Moses says, “*cursed be anyone who deprives the immigrant, the orphan and the widow of justice.*”

And what I do know is this: that outside of our Scripture in our own heritage though surely molded by the Scripture, our own Statue of Liberty echoes these very words, using the words of Emma Lazarus, known, to most all of us:

Give me your tired, your poor,  
your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,  
send these the homeless tempest-tossed to me.  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

No perfect solution to these issues, no clear policies to recommend (that’s not my business!), but what I know surely as foundational is this:

- that if in fear or panic we leave Jesus out of the discussion
- if in fear or panic we leave the ongoing incontrovertible message of the Bible out of the discussion
- if we leave our heritage which has impacted the families of every single one of us here today out of the discussion and out of the debate

What I know is this: that we will not be walking where God is walking. We will not have entered into the places where God dares to enter into. We will not be thinking his thoughts after him. We will not be doing his will – and – *we will not be or become the people who in our brighter moments we desperately want to be.* At that point by default even on our own turf the devil wins. But the devil doesn't. And I for one will not live a life in which, to the fullest extent of my ability at least, I allow that to happen.

The truth is that God is here – right here and now, in the darkest of places as well as the brightest of places.

The truth is that God does win, and summons us to join him in his battle, to play our part in his battle, to be transformed by the proximity of his life to ours, intertwined with ours by the Spirit whom he has given to live within us, so that in large ways or small we become a part of the victory of God, of good, over evil.

The fruit of the spirit, the fruit of God's presence is, says the apostle Paul, is *love Joy peace patience kindness generosity faithfulness gentleness and perhaps at such a time as this above all else self-control.* Against such he says there is no law. May God's fruit abound in us and in our church and in our nation always.

Let us pray. Holy God look down upon this world which you love and to which you sent your Son and help us to believe that you give to us a part in your kingdom, in your ways, your plans and your purposes. Help us in our confusion and in our fear to know what that part this is to be, and by your spirit help us to play it. Amen.

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## APPENDIX:

### Strangers, Aliens, and Foreigners -- Some examples from the Bible

#### The Old Testament

Exodus 22:21, 23:9

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.

Leviticus 19:33-34

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. 34 The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

Deuteronomy 27:19

"Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice."

Jeremiah 7:6

If you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place

Leviticus 19:10 (Law Gleaning, sharing)

You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien

Leviticus 24:22

You shall have one law for the alien and for the citizen

Numbers 9:14

You shall have one statute for both the resident alien and the native.

#### Jesus' interest in Strangers and Foreigners

Matthew 25:35, 38, 43-44

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me . . . And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? . . . I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'

Luke 10:25-37

The Good Samaritan

Luke 17:1-19

The Samaritan Leper

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