



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Eighth Sunday After Trinity, July 13th, 2008

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
And of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

CHRISTIANS, though many don't seem to realize it these days, are fighting a war – a war that's been going on since the Creation. And here in America it looks as if the lions have the upper hand at this stage of the battle because many Christians don't seem to know whom they are fighting.

One of the basic rules of warfare sounds rather obvious. Indeed, it is so obvious it often overlooked – even by professional soldiers. The rule is: "Know thy enemy." And this is precisely what Jesus is advising us to do in today's Gospel: "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves . . ."

It is advice we need to take seriously. After all, it is a lot easier to recognize a physical enemy than a spiritual one. It isn't hard to recognize physical enemy when he's wacking you on the head or shooting bullets at you. A spiritual enemy, by contrast, is usually offers you everything your little heart desires.

This is the great danger of spiritual warfare. And, sad thing about the of this country today, is that a vast majority of Christians have not only have they lost sight of their spiritual enemy, they wouldn't recognize him even if he came up and kicked them in the backside.

One of the problems is that even those Christians who've recognized the danger often identify the enemy as some sort of "ology" or "ism." Conservatives tend to point to such "isms and ologies" as secular humanism, socialism, Marxism and liberation theology. Liberals, by contrast, tend to point to "isms" like fascism, racism and sexism. Neither are on target. The real enemy is Satan – the devil, the Prince of Darkness, Beelzebub, Lucifer, Mephistopheles, Old Nick or any other names humankind has applied to him over the millennia.

Today, however, we fail to recognize Satan because we are much too sophisticated to think of him as a person. Evil personified is notion that belongs to much more primitive time; a time before Freud and the great strides we have made in the realm of psychology and anthropology.

Our conceptions of evil are far more realistic. We don't really believe that people are inherently evil. Folks who do terrible things generally have a reason for doing so – trauma in childhood, lack of a male role model, that sort of thing. The idea of Satan as a personified force of evil is faintly ludicrous. If we believed that sort of thing would we really dress our kids up as him at Halloween,

Even if there is more to evil than an unfortunate upbringing, the notion that there is chap called the devil is simply outlandish. Evil is simply a predisposition of human beings to act selfishly: the dark side of the force, if you will. This is an exceedingly dangerous way of thinking. It is, in fact, just what Satan wants us to believe. If we do not believe in he exists we won't look out for the pitfalls and traps he sets for us. As long as we are prepared to blame ourselves – or, as more often happens, other people – for the evil that occurs in this world, we are not laying the blame on him.

Our modern disbelief has afforded him even more opportunities than usual to inflict pain and suffering upon our selves and upon others. Is it really an accident that the two most awful wars in history were fought in this 20th century; a century in which mankind's belief in the devil waned even faster than its belief in God?

During the fight against fascism in the Second World War, we allied ourselves with a force no less evil than that which we were trying to destroy. The outcome was the spread of Soviet- style Communism, an evil as horrible as fascism, across more than half of the globe. How Satan must have laughed! It didn't matter which side came out on top. Either way, Satan won and mankind lost.

One of the consequences of not believing in Satan is that we start blaming others for the evil things he does. And the one they usually end up blaming is God. For example, people in trouble often whine: "Why God's is putting me through this"? But it's foolish to accuse God of being the source of the evil that afflicts us.. He is the very source of life and all goodness. His nature is perfect love. But, if we don't identify the real author of evil, who is there left to blame?

Clive Staples (C.S.) Lewis, the great Anglican author and scholar, wrote in the preface to his book "The Screwtape Letters" that the commonest question he was asked was whether he really believed in the devil. This is his answer: "I do. That is to say, I believe in angels, and I believe that some of these, by the abuse of their free will have become the enemies of God . . . They do not differ in nature from good angels, but their nature is depraved. Devil is the opposite of angel only as Bad Man is opposite from Good Man. Satan, the leader or dictator of devils, is the opposite, not of God, but of [the Archangel] Michael."

Nobody can accuse C.S. Lewis of lacking sophistication. He was a Cambridge professor – a Fellow of Magdalen College, one of the world's most respected seats of learning. Yet, for all that, he believed firmly in Satan. He had no choice.

Both Old and New Testaments deal with Satan at length. Excluding synonyms and the like, the Bible contains 55 references to "Satan" and more than 120 references to "the devil" and "devils." Jesus was not only tempted by Satan in the wilderness, he testified to witnessing the devil's fall: "I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven." This is a statement so emphatic it brooks no alternative interpretation.

Perhaps part of today's problem is that we have not been trained to recognize Satan when we see him. We are conditioned by depictions of the devil in medieval art, by newspaper cartoons and by the outfits we hire for costume parties. We expect him to look hideously ugly or obviously devilish.

That's not the way he looks at all. C.S. Lewis points out that the devil is an angel. His name "Lucifer" means "light." He can take the form of a beautiful woman or a handsome man – a newscaster, movie star, a pop singer, a clean-cut storm trooper, a newscaster, a slick politician or a honey-tongued preacher.

He speaks to us in the language of our desires. He doesn't tempt us with things we don't want. He persuades us the ends justify the means and keeps us supplied with rationalizations and excuses for our short cuts, compromises and petty betrayals. He is hard to resist as St. Paul's candidly admitted to the Romans: "The good that I would I do, I do not: but the evil that I would not, that I do . . ."

Jesus has promised us the power to escape Satan's thrall. In St Luke's Gospel, he tells us (10:19): "I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you." Surely the time has come to take him at his word – and give the devil his due. *AMEN.*

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.