

## HOW (NOT) TO CONFRONT EVIL

On living confidently in God's victory over the powers  
*Ephesians 1:17-23; Matthew 28:16-20; Philippians 3:18-21*

What joy to lift our **glad voices** to the one who  
"burst from the fetters of darkness . . . to live and to save."  
Jesus **lives** and **reigns**. Jesus has **risen** and we shall **not die**.  
This is a **hymn**, and a **truth**,  
**too large** to be **confined** to the season of Easter.  
This is the **basis** of our **hope**.  
This is the **ground** of our **faith**.  
Christ is **alive**. The powers of **death** and **evil** lie in **defeat**.  
It cannot be **overstated**.

And we just heard some **glorious prose**,  
in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, 1:17ff.  
Let's review.

In a heartfelt prayer, he poured himself out,  
"I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ . . .  
may give you a **spirit** of **wisdom** and **revelation** . . .  
so you may know the hope to which he has called you . . .  
and the immeasurable greatness of his power."  
He prayed that they may know **hope** . . . and **power**.  
And what **power** is this?  
V. 20: The power that "God put . . . to work in Christ  
when he raised him from the dead  
and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places,  
far above all rule and **authority** and **power** and **dominion** . . .  
in this age [and] in the age to come."

Furthermore, this same power now is embodied in the church.  
V. 22: "And [God] put all things under [Jesus] feet  
and made him head over all things for the church,  
which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."

It's hard to **unpack** all that **lofty language**,  
and figure out what it **means** for us here at Park View Mennonite,  
in this **time** and **place**.

What does it mean to **embody** the **fullness** of **Jesus**  
in this **world** where we are,

to live in the **power** of the one who raised Jesus from the dead?

You know, that's the question behind everyone of these sermons.  
But today the **question** comes into even **sharper focus**.

How does the **church**, representing God's **peaceable kingdom**,  
live **publicly** in a world of **darkness**,  
where **powers of evil** work **against** the **kingdom of God**?  
How are we to be the **church in public**?

As citizens of God's kingdom, we live in the **power** of the **resurrection**,  
and serve the one who sits  
"far above all rule and authority and power and dominion."  
So how do we navigate all the **brokenness**, **darkness**, **pain**,  
**violence**, and **outright evil** that **thrives** in this world?  
It doesn't just **exist**, it **thrives**. It **grows**. It **reproduces**.  
Where *is* this God of **light** and **life** we represent?  
Where *is* the One who already **vanquished darkness** and **death**?

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We can't deny there is **brokenness** and **darkness** in the world.  
But there are some, including Christians,  
who downplay how **pervasive** and **insidious** the darkness is.  
There are some who explain it as simply **human beings**  
**failing** to live up to their **potential**.  
The more we **learn** about ourselves and others,  
the **kinder** and more **generous** and more **hospitable** we will be,  
the **better** things will **get** in this world.  
If we just keep calling on our **better selves**,  
the **darkness** will slowly **fade**,  
and some day we will **arrive** at a **place of light**.  
If we just try harder, the **kingdom of peace** will come.

Well . . . by all means, let us engage in the *best* of **human discipline**,  
let us make **every effort** to be more **kind**, **generous**, and **hospitable**.  
By doing so, we *are* in some way making the world a **better place**.

But let us not deny that there are **real powers** of **evil** at work,  
and these **powers** are the **sworn enemies** of God.

If we are the **people of God**, these **enemies** will need to be **engaged**.

It's tempting to **deny** the **reality** of **dark powers**.

We are, after all, immersed in a culture that has put a lot of faith in **scientific rationalism**.

We were trained to think that if its **real**, we can prove it by **experiment** or **equation** or **logic**.

That culture, however, is rapidly changing.

Most people today, especially the **younger generation**, have **little difficulty** believing in things **spiritual**—**good** and **bad**.

Even the **scientific community** admits that sometimes science involves a **leap of faith**, if you will, unprovable **presuppositions**.

Nevertheless, we are sometimes slow to admit that **enemies of God** in this world are **real**, or have **personality**, or can be **engaged**.

In the world of Jesus and the early church, it was common knowledge that God had **enemies**, and they needed to be **confronted**.

One of the **major themes** of the gospels—all four Gospels—was the **confrontation** between **God's kingdom**, and the **kingdoms** of the **world**, and the **kingdoms** of **darkness**.

Again and again Jesus **confronted** the **powers** that **worked against** God's purposes.

It didn't matter where the powers were— in the **systems of domination** in the **Empire**, or in the systems of the **religious establishment**, or in the life of a **demon-oppressed individual**, or even in the **flawed thinking** of one of his **disciples**.

He moved from **one** to **another** without skipping a beat.

In both his **words** and **deeds** he **challenged** the authority of **Caesar**, he **confronted** the **scribes** and **Pharisees**, he **commanded demons** to **release** their **hold** on individuals, and he said to **Peter**, “Get **behind** me, **Satan!**”

These were all **different kinds** of **powers**, but they were all **working against** the **kingdom of God**.

And Jesus **confronted** them all **directly**.

He was **unapologetic**.

But when he **engaged** in this **spiritual war** with the **powers** he always **stayed true** to the **life-affirming** and **non-violent character** of **God's kingdom**.

Jesus' whole **ministry expressed**, in one form or another, this **conflict** between the **powers** of this **age**, and the **power** of **God**.

From the start he proclaimed, “**God rules**, and **no one else**.”

“The **kingdom of God** is near you.”

And he worked to form a **community** of the **kingdom** of God, a community with a **contrasting set of values** than the values of **Empire**.

In his **words** and **deeds** he **confronted** the **powers** and prepared *others* to confront them.

You can't read the book of Acts without noticing the **constant conflict** between the God and the powers that be. It happened in any and all arenas of life:

The **systemic evil** of the **Roman Empire**.

The **spiritual violence** done by **religious authorities**.

**Individuals** oppressed by **demons**.

**Corruption** in the **church** itself.

Paul warned the church in Philippians 3:18ff, that “many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.”

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Now, it's beyond the **scope** of this **sermon**, and beyond the **study** I've **personally done**, for me to spend a lot of time trying to sort out the various **manifestations** of the **demonic** in our **world today**.

I know there is **debate** about the **extent** to which these powers are **personal** or **systemic**, whether they are **actual beings** with **personality**, or whether they are only a **force**, or a **phenomenon**.

I think that's a **worthwhile debate**.

It has **theological** and **ethical implications**,  
in terms of how we **confront** the **powers**.

I'm not an **expert** here, but I've **seen enough evidence**,  
and **talked to enough people**, to say with **confidence**,  
it's not "**either-or**," it's "**both-and**."

I have no doubt that all the **anti-kingdom powers**  
we read about in the New Testament—  
both the **structural** and **systemic** powers,  
*and* the **powers** that **manifest** as **beings**—  
are in some way **still present** in our **world** today.

It's hard to **deny** that there is, in the world,  
a **strong resistance** to the **good** and **saving purposes** of God.

This **resistance** to **God's kingdom** and its **values**  
is **wide-spread** and it **permeates** all **aspects** of life.

And it's a **resistance** that we, as **citizens** of **God's kingdom**,  
are called on to **engage**, to **confront**.

So what does that mean, in **practical terms**, for the church?

The specific way we go about **confronting** the **powers**  
*depends*, of course, on what **kind of power** we're **confronting**.

It depends how they **manifest themselves**,  
in **systems**, or **institutions**, or in **persons**.

It requires **careful discernment**.

But one thing I can say that I believe holds **true across the board**,  
is we do not **confront** the **powers alone**.

We confront them as a **body of Christ**—  
as **members together** in a **mutually-discerning community**,  
a community in **covenant** with one another,  
a community that **embodies** God's **kingdom** in our **common life**,  
a community that **forms disciples** for life in this world.

That all seems so **obvious**, but it needs to be said.

Because there are lots of **lone rangers** out there  
who can be **downright dangerous**.

Some people relish the idea that they're  
**David** facing **Goliath** . . .

and whether their **schtick** is **exorcism**,  
or **taking on** the big **evil systems** of government,  
they do it **without communal discernment**,  
**without accountability**,  
and with **very little humility**.

The **powers** in this **world** that **work against** God's kingdom—  
both **systems** and **beings**—  
are not to be **trifled** with.

They require the **wisdom** . . . and **safety** . . .  
of a **mutually discerning body**.

But neither do they have any **ultimate power**,  
that we need to live in **fear** of,  
or **obsess about**,  
or get all **freaked out over**.

And furthermore, it's not up to **everyone** of us **individually**,  
to **engage** in every kind of **spiritual battle** against the **powers**.

We are not *all* called to be **actively engaged**  
in a **ministry** of **freeing persons** from **demonic oppression**.  
But there are those with the **knowledge**, **faith**, and **discernment**  
who are **called** to do so,  
*with* the **support** and **accountability** of their **community**.

And we are not *all* called to **take on the powers**  
of the **domination systems** in our world.  
But there are those with **specialized knowledge**, **faith**,  
and **discernment**  
who are **called** to do so,  
with the **support** and **accountability** of their **community**.

But everyone of us is called to **be who we are**.  
And that is the **biggest threat** to the **powers**.  
Just to live an **authentic kingdom-of-God life**,  
out in **public**,  
**unafraid**,  
in **radical defiance** of the **status-quo**, **anti-kingdom** powers.

If the **domination systems** (a term that Walter Wink likes to use)  
are **hell-bent** on making us into **people of greed**,  
and **over-consumption**,  
and **ego-ism** . . .  
or are **hell-bent** (and I use that word purposely) on making us into  
people who use **coercion** and **violence** to get what we want . . .  
then the way to **confront** those powers,  
and **unmask** their **lies** and **deceit** and **insecurities**,  
is to simply **be who we are!**  
A **community of disciples of Jesus**  
who **live lives of radical generosity**,  
and **simplicity**,  
and **hospitality**,  
and **self-sacrifice**.

If the **whole community** of God's people **engaged** in this kind of  
**non-violent counter-offensive** against the **powers** of this **age**,  
what better way *is* there to **demonstrate** God's **victory**?

Why do you think the **powers** in Jesus' day were so **threatened**—  
the **domination systems** of **Empire** and **Temple**,  
*and* the **demons** that **oppressed**?  
Why do you think **Rome** and **Jerusalem** were so **concerned**?  
Why did the **demons tremble**?  
And ultimately, why was Jesus **executed**?

Because those who **held** the **power**  
saw Jesus **demonstrate** a **power** they **could not fight against**.  
They saw a **community** forming around Jesus,  
that lived by a **set of values**,  
that were **starkly different** than the **values**  
that helped **prop up** their own **power**.  
They were afraid of **losing power**,  
so they used *their* kind of **power** to **do away** with Jesus.

What they didn't *know*, was that the **power** Jesus **used**  
was a **completely different kind of power**.  
It could not be **killed**.  
It was not **subject** to a **cross** or **sword**.

It was the **power** of **love**.  
It was the **power** of **life**.  
It was the **power** of **God**.  
And the **resurrection** of Jesus **sealed** the **victory**  
over the **powers** of **death** and **darkness**.

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And *glory to God!*  
That is the **same power**, Paul said in Ephesians,  
that has been passed on to us,  
from God, through Jesus Christ, to the body of Christ.  
That is the power that Jesus officially passed on to his disciples,  
just before leaving them and returning to heaven.  
In today's Gospel reading from Matthew 28, Jesus said,  
“**All authority** in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”  
Now, you go and do what I've been doing.  
Make disciples . . . call them to new life . . .  
teach them to obey everything I commanded you.  
And remember, I am **with you** to the end of the age.

So . . . when the **people of God** simply **are** who they are called to **be**,  
and **do** what they are called to **do**,  
the powers of this age will **tremble**.

And that applies whether we're talking about the powers **embedded**  
in the **Democratic Party**,  
or in the **Republican Party**,  
or in the **government professional bureaucracy**,  
or in the **military-industrial complex**,  
or in **big labor unions**,  
or in **big corporations**,  
or on **Wall Street**,  
or on **Main Street**,  
or sometimes even the powers embedded in **church bureaucracies**.  
And it applies if we're talking about a **demonic presence** and **power**  
in the life of a **disturbed** and **oppressed individual**.

*We're* not the ones who **need** to **tremble**.  
It is those powers that do whatever it takes to **cling** to their power,

including **deceit, coercion, violence.**

It is those who **represent the powers defeated at the resurrection**  
who will **tremble** when **faced** with the **people of God**  
living as a **community** of the **Spirit**,  
in the **power** of the **resurrection.**

A poet once wrote this story of a **lame and frightened child at night**,  
and the **mother** who brought **comforting words**,

*The thunder and lightning gave voice to the night;  
the little lame child cried aloud in her fright.  
“Hush, little baby, a story I’ll tell,  
of a love that has vanquished the powers of hell.*

*“Sweetness in the air, and justice on the wind,  
laughter in the house where the mourners had been.  
The deaf shall have music, the blind have new eyes,  
the standards of death taken down by surprise.*

*“Release for the captives, an end to the wars,  
new streams in the desert, new hope for the poor.  
The little lame children will dance as they sing,  
and play with the bears and the lions in spring.*

*“Hush little baby, let go of your fear:  
the Lord loves his own, and your mother is here.”  
The child fell asleep as the lantern did burn.  
The mother sang on ‘till her Bridegroom’s return.*

*Alleluia, the great storm is over, lift up your wings and fly!*

And lift up your voices, and sing! #71 in Sing the Journey.

—Philip L. Kniss, October 12, 2008