

November 10, 2013

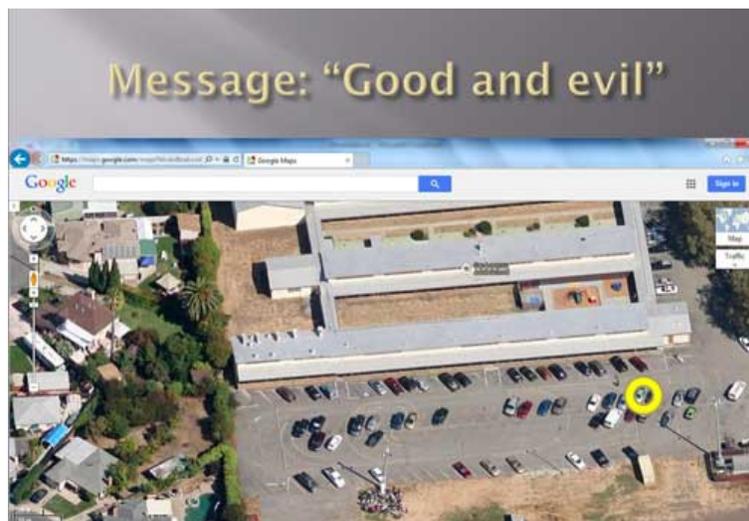
GOOD AND EVIL

by Rick Carlberg

Scripture Reading: Psalm 145:1-5, 17-21; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17;
Luke 20:27-38

When Clarissa called me Wednesday night I had no idea what I was going to talk about today. Due to my getting up early each day for work, I was about to go to bed when she called. I was able to take Friday off to prepare this message, though with the help of our 2 cats who competed to sit in my lap while I typed out these words into my computer.

Normally, I have the luxury of a couple of weeks to ponder the lectionary, find that common theme of the scripture, prepare the message, cross-check all of the facts, word fuss it 25 times and feel as comfortable as I can when I give the message. Well, not today and not today for reasons beyond the lack of time. We have challenging scripture today, particularly 2 Thessalonians about the “Man of Lawlessness”, an uncomfortable scripture at best and the somewhat hard to understand gospel story about a woman being married to 7 brothers of her deceased husband.



Now, you are probably wondering about this Google satellite photo, with its yellow circle. Stand by as it is part of the message today, but let's review our scripture first. We will be back to what this photo is in about 5 minutes.

Our Psalm reading is a beautiful prayer of thanksgiving and love of God. David heaps praise upon praise on God. He pours out his love, verse after verse. In the first half of the Psalm we see "I bless your name forever", "his greatness is unsearchable", meaning no one can comprehend how great God is. In the second half we see "The Lord is just in all his ways", "The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call him in truth", "The Lord watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy." .. and in the last verse, "My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord, and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever." These are powerful, reassuring words of the goodness of God as he looks over us, protecting us and assuring eventual, but not necessarily immediate justice, in his creation.

Before we get to Luke's passage today, we need to understand the context of the situation Jesus was in. One of the challenges of just taking the scripture from the lectionary is it makes it easy to miss the bigger picture and in today's reading I think that is particularly true. Immediately before today's reading he is questioned about paying taxes to Rome. Jesus asks for a Roman coin and asks whose head is on it. Answer: Caesar and then says the words we know: give Caesar what is due Caesar and give God what is due God. Well, the people who challenged Jesus with that question were sent by the Pharisees to trap Jesus in an early attempt to get rid of him, trying to betray him to the Roman government for a crime against Caesar. It is similar individuals who also have evil motivations in asking him about marriage after the resurrection.

This time it is not the Pharisees who are behind the plot, it is the Sadducees, a more aristocratic group that did not believe in a resurrection but they also are trying to trap Jesus. They did not interpret the law as the Pharisees did, so the Pharisees and the Sadducees did not get along very well. But it is as if they called a truce just to get rid of Jesus, who made them both feel uncomfortable.

So the Sadducees ask Jesus a complicated "what if" question, involving the marriage of a woman to 8 men, 1 at a time, all brothers, which according to the law at that time was expected after a brother died. The question to Jesus

is, Who is she married to after she dies and the resurrection occurs? Per my study Bible, the time of resurrection means the end time, ala the Book of Revelations end time. Jesus answers by saying there is no marriage after those who are resurrected. They will live like angels, children of God and God is for the living, not the dead. Although I will be coming back to this later in the message, I want to emphasize we get to be children again.

It is about the end time that Paul writes to the leaders of the church in Thessalonica. Paul writes do not be alarmed about the second coming of Christ. Do not be deceived. Paul knows something has frightened them, he does not know exactly what, but he urges them to be strong. He goes on to say however, that there will be signs of when the end time begins. The “Man of Lawlessness” will be lead a rebellion. He will claim to be God himself, but destined for destruction. This is not Satan by the way, but some other being who will be at the start of the final battle between good and evil. Looking back at history, one can understand why the church in Thessalonica was frightened. Nero was emperor of Rome and his atrocities on the people of the Roman Empire and particularly the Christian church were well known.

Paul goes on to bless the church and its leaders in Thessalonica for their faith and belief in the truth. He encourages them to proclaim the good news as they were taught, living the gospel of Christ.

So we have 3 scriptures on good and evil. We have the thankfulness of the good in David’s Psalm, the deflecting of evil by Jesus in Luke and Paul’s warning of what the ultimate evil will look like at the end time.

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Now, back to this picture above me and I need to say “thank you” to Google Maps for allowing me to find this within just a few seconds of looking for it: This is the grade school I went to in San Lorenzo, California, a south suburb of Oakland. Back then, it was Linda Vista Grade School... it is now an adult continuing education school. The blacktop area where you see cars parked was our main playground, where we played 4 square, basketball, hopscotch, kick ball and my favorite, dodge ball. Where the cell phone tower is in the lower right hand corner were our monkey bars and swing sets, where we had hours of fun. Looking back, it was an idyllic time. We had friends we knew for years and we were looking forward to what lay ahead of us at Bohannon Junior High School, next door just to the right of this picture.

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..and then there is that yellow circle. I am sure I have the circle within 5 or 10 feet of where Miss Mosely, my 6th grade teacher, came up to me at morning recess one Friday and asked me to return to class. I recall asking why, as recess was not over – it had only just begun minutes before.

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It was November 22, 1963 and she told me that the President had been shot. We all returned to class. From a desk drawer she pulled out a transistor radio and turned it to KCBS, a San Francisco AM radio station and we all listened to the news. We were together in that class room when the news broke that President Kennedy was dead. Class was dismissed that Friday late morning. I remember watching the funeral service on a black and white television, feeling grief and sadness over the death of our President.

12 days from now, this November 22nd marks the 50th anniversary of that horrible day. It was my wake up call to true evil in the world. Yes, I had seen people fighting, I knew about war, burglaries and murder. *This was different.* Although I had never seen the President in real life, I knew he was real and relevant not just to me, but all of us. He dealt with the Cuban Missile Crisis and had pointed us in the direction of the moon. His assassination was directed against all of us. I never looked at the world the same way after that. A streak of cynicism became part of my personality, a streak that would be reinforced within 5 years by the assassinations of the President's brother, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. The world was not as ideal and good any more. Reflecting on it, my childhood somewhat ended that November day.

Before I go on, where was your yellow circle? Where were you that day?

The scriptures today make clear that there is evil in the world. We humans really have not changed since ancient times. A rough calculation shows we are about 150 generations removed from Abraham. We humans still behave the same, just with a higher degree of technical sophistication, but some with a mean spirit.

While we do not control the actions of others, we control our own actions, our own behavior. Let us behave as Christ encourages us in our reading of Luke today. We need to be children of the resurrection, innocent and loved as one of Christ's own.

David reminds us in the Psalm reading that no one knows how great God is. Our minds cannot fathom, we cannot understand all of the good things and situations God presents to us and has in store for us in heaven. We need to appreciate them. We need to thank God for what he has done for us and will do for us as his promises to us are fulfilled.

I think the best good news is we get to be children again in a never ending kingdom without the worries and challenges we face today. As Paul tells us, it takes patience though. Do not be shaken or frightened by events around us. Keep the faith. Stay strong in your belief that Christ is the way. Stay strong in your belief we will be like angels. Stay strong in your belief that our God is the God of the living and we get to live forever in his kingdom.

We cannot prevent evil from entering our lives, but with Christ we can endure its effects on us. Maybe someday I will be able to forget where that yellow circle is drawn. Maybe there are monkey bars and swings to enjoy again in the innocent world of eternal life.

Amen