

“Stand Firm”
Acts 19:1-22
October 19, 2008
Rev. Curtis J. Young

*The text of this sermon may be used without first obtaining my permission. I do ask, however, that if you use any portion of the message for teaching or preaching preparations, that you would e-mail me a brief note to say you are making use of it. This would be a courtesy and help to me personally. You will note that in some sermons sections are bracketed between two sets of three asterisks (***). The purpose is to delineate material that I did not preach, but that is integral to understanding the theology or exegesis of what was preached. My e-mail address is revyoung@comcast.net – Rev. Curt Young)*

Given what Paul faced in Ephesus -- demon possession, the widespread practice of the occult, and notorious idolatry at the Temple of Artemis (Diana) -- it should come as no surprise if the letters Paul wrote from Ephesus as well as to the church he planted there emphasize the reality of spiritual warfare.

From Ephesus, he wrote the Corinthians: “For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” (II Cor. 10: 3-5)

From Rome, he wrote to the Ephesians: “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm...” (Eph. 6:10-14)

No where more than at Ephesus is the gospel ministry so plainly an all out assault against the kingdom of darkness. All the strongholds Satan uses to hold people captive were fair game.

The Gospel ministry is warfare. It is as much spiritual warfare today as ever before.

Ideas have power that shapes our most fundamental loyalties and commitments. We all have them. They extend well beyond the limits of our senses.

No one believes in nothing. No one lives for nothing. “Nothing” is a throw away word, a lame excuse for people too lazy to think, or too ashamed to confess what they are committed to. Becoming a Christian, making that commitment to Christ as Lord, involves breaking commitments.

Whether that commitment is to another person whose influence is destructive or to a lifestyle that is self-centered or to a god that is an outright demon, at their core, the commitments that must be broken are spiritual commitments. This is so plainly displayed in our verses as new believers burned expensive collections of occult literature to which they had been bound for so long.

The world is full of gods, many “gods and many lords”, Paul wrote the Corinthians from Ephesus. (I Cor. 8:5) But behind all these principalities and powers there is just one, “the god of this world who blinds the minds of the unbelieving.” (II Cor. 4:4) Jesus called him “the ruler of this world.”

Satan insists on hiding behind masks and clinging to them. Therefore, he must be exposed. He refuses to give up control. Therefore, he must be cast out. He always resists. Therefore, he must always be opposed.

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When Jesus announced to Peter that he would build his church, a new humanity united by his blood, he spoke of the church assaulting Satan, attacking his strongholds, and overcoming the gates of hell.

Given the content of Acts 19, this sermon might well be titled from the Jesus words, “And the gates of hell will not prevail against you.” Verse 20 concludes (NKJV), “So the Word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed.”

At Ephesus the principalities and powers were confronted with the name of Jesus and defeated again and again. The kingdom of God which Paul argued so persuasively about in the synagogue in hall of Tyrannus was present and prevailing.

At the outset, the Holy Spirit filling John’s disciples, so that they spoke in tongues, confirmed all the promise and power of Pentecost.

Next we read of extraordinary miracles occurred as people took Paul’s sweat rags to touch and heal the sick, or deliver the possessed. For this kind of miracle we must go back to Jesus’ ministry when the woman with the flow of blood reached out just to touch the hem of his garment, and Mark tells us, “power went out from him.” (Mark 5:25-30)

People publicly confessing their sins and burning their scrolls of magic and spells take us all the way back to the ministry of John the Baptist when masses publicly confessed their sins at the edge of the Jordan River.

The power of the name of Jesus was so intense, so focused here.

Amidst all this, we read the failed attempt by exorcists to use the name of Jesus as if a magical oath anyone might use to cast out demons. This is as if to say: What was taking place was not of man’s will or man’s design. It was solely the work of the Lord Jesus himself working through the man he had sent.

So “the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor.” (17) What took place was all about lifting up the name of Jesus Christ, so that people could see clearly who he is, believe in him, and come to experience the Kingdom of God in their lives. (c.f. vs. 10 and reference to Asia)

What are we to make of accounts like the one before us and the references to Satan and demons in the scriptures? Should we shy away from embracing the language our Lord used to describe the world? Should we psychologize this account or make some other attempt to re-interpret the report Luke gives?

It barely needs to be said that if you have an enemy who hates you and who will stop at nothing to destroy you, nothing would be so helpful to him as convincing you he does not exist, so you walk through his world unarmed – in fact, ashamed to be armed.

I would offer two observations. The first has to do with why the biblical witness is so often reinterpreted to exclude the idea that there is a real Satan and real demons. The worldview of scripture differs markedly from the prevailing worldview of our culture.

The prevailing worldview is strictly materialistic. A better way to put it is, that the prevailing world view is strictly sensual. If I cannot perceive it with my five senses or technology that extends my senses, it does not exist.

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If someone claims he knows something to be real apart from the senses, the claim is false. He just has an idea in his head. Hence, all theology – any statement made about God -- is merely psychology. The same is true of demonology – anything you would say about demons. It is all in your head.

I agree that if you are a sensualist, you must label Acts 19 as a false interpretation of something that happened. But not for the reason you say. You say it is false because “demons” aren’t real, when the truth that whether they are real is not the issue for you. The issue for you is you are closed to the possibility. The issue is not whether they are real but whether they are acceptable.

If a demon came up to you, introduced himself, and bit your ear, you would come up with another explanation. If a person came to you tormented by a demon, you would be powerless to help.

We all have our grids, our filters through which we interpret reality. Scripture serves that purpose for the Christian as much as Enlightenment philosophy serves that purpose for the culture as a whole.

The real question is not about demons; it’s about worldview. What’s the filter that shapes your worldview? This brings me to my second observation, about the witness of the scriptures themselves.

Jesus said that heaven and earth will pass away but the Word of God endures forever. This sums up why the scriptures are uniquely suited to be our filter for perceiving reality. They are so much more than a filter. They determine what reality is.

By the Word of God the heavens and earth and all that is in them exist. The Word of God is over reality. It determines what is real. So if the Word of God as revealed in scripture shapes my thinking to accept that Satan is real and demons exist, I accept it. Just as when Scripture shapes my thinking to reject the possibility that idols are true gods, I accept that.

Finally, why does any of this matter? Because Satan and demons are more than a theoretical explanation for why certain things happen. They are real, and they must be confronted. And the only way to oppose them is by resorting to the Word of God and lifting high the name of Jesus. I’m talking about praying in his name against the evil we see, holding fast to the word of our testimony concerning Christ as Lord, and being more than willing to suffer rejection for him.

In the quote from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians which I read earlier, he said, “Be strong...take your stand against the devil’s schemes...stand your ground...stand...Stand firm...”

Paul was using the language of instruction given to Roman soldiers. Their method of battle was to walk onto the battlefield, plant the standard of their Emperor, and then, stand firm. The enemy would come for sure, and when he did, they were to resist, repulse, wear down and destroy him. Their strategy lay in holding onto the standard and never quitting the fight.

By these words the Spirit instructs all of us, in light of the presence of Satan and his spiritual forces of evil, to assume the stance of that Roman soldier and his confidence as well. The emperor fully equipped him with armor, sword, and shield so he could stand confident. The Lord has fully equipped us.

I am told that in the heat of hand to hand combat, Roman soldiers fought in pairs, back to back to protect each other. The soldier relied on his partner for his life. The term used for the partner was same term used in the New Testament of the Holy Spirit as our helper.

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The Lord’s provision is greater than anything Caesar gave his troops. In the first part of Ephesians 1, Paul wrote that he prayed,

“that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know...his incomparably great power for us who believe.” He then declared to that power to consist of Christ’s presence with us. “And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”

So that’s why Jesus knew the gates of hell would not prevail against us. He knew that he himself, once exalted as Lord, would be with us and in us. He knew he would never leave or forsake us.

What is left is but for us to take our place behind Paul and the saints across the centuries, testifying with them, “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. ...And who is equal to such a task?... (No one! Nevertheless,) in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God. This is the faith that overcomes the world.