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Spiritual Warfare: Christus Victor Various texts

This is the second sermon in a series called "Spiritual Warfare." If you didn't hear last week's message, I encourage you to download it from our website or app and listen to it. This series will build upon itself. You need to have heard the previous weeks in order to get the most out of the sermons that follow. Let me start by reminding you of last week's text from Ephesians 6:

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. This is the word of the Lord.

Paul is making an essential point: there is more to reality than this physical world around us. We westerners tend to think of reality as only that which we can perceive with our five senses...only that which is logical and scientifically provable. But Paul reminds us that we actually share this realm with a spiritual world. We live in an overlap between the physical and spiritual world. If you could put on spiritual UV glasses, you'd be amazed to discover the spiritual beings in our midst. Some of them are good. Angels.

And some of them are evil beings that hate God and want to do us harm. We learned some of the names of their supreme leader last week, didn't we? Satan. The Accuser. The Adversary. *Diabolos*, the Devil. The Slanderer. The Splitter. Beelzebub (the Lord of Dung). Or, as he was known in pre-Civil war America, "Old Mr. Scratch."

Paul tells us that our fight is not with the humans that appear to be our enemy. Our real battle is a spiritual fight with Old Mr. Scratch. Your first decision, then, is this: do you believe the Bible...the gospel writers...Paul... Jesus who ALL agree that the Devil is real and must be defeated...or don't you? If you don't...then the rest of this series might be entertaining but it won't be helpful. Because I assume that we have a real spiritual enemy...and that part of our prayer life involves doing battle with the forces that want to discourage, dishearten and depress us.

After last Sunday's message, a visitor named Evan came up to me and said, "I am going to be praying for you, your wife and your sleep...because when you begin to teach on spiritual warfare, it makes you a target." Boy was he right! Do you think it is a coincidence that 10 days ago I got a notice from the IRS that someone had stolen my Social Security Number and was trying to file a false tax return under my name? As you can imagine, it has been a complete hassle and, frankly, a little frightening. I don't think it coincidental; I think the

enemy wants to distract and discourage me...which suggests to me that we are on the right track!

So let's move on. Here's the question for today: Who is in charge of this world? Who do you think is in charge of this world of ours? It's a trick question, isn't it? We Presbyterians are big on the sovereignty of God. God is ultimately in charge of everything, right? Ultimately, his will...will be done, right?

BUT...the New Testament makes it clear that ...for the time being... the Devil is in charge of this world. This world is HIS domain. Don't believe me? Then take it up with Jesus. Three times in John's gospel, Jesus uses the same phrase to describe Satan. He calls him "the Ruler of This World." Here is a painting of Satan as an Angel of Light, summoning his forces to battle. And Paul describes Satan as "the god of this world." (2 Corinthians 4:4) John writes this in his first letter: "We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one." (1 John 5.8)

"Wait a second," you might retort. "If God created this world and everything in it...and if he called it "good", how can Paul say that? And why would Jesus call the Devil the 'Ruler of this World?'" What's the answer? The Fall! This takes us back to Genesis 3 where Old Scratch appears as the Serpent and tempts Eve into disbelieving and disobeying God...and thus sin is introduced into God's good world. In that moment, it's like Adam and Eve turned over the keys of creation to Satan. Someday, God will take them back. But for now...this is Satan's show.

If this is true, it changes that way we look at the world. It helps makes sense of the raw evil we see in the likes of ISIS. But frankly, it also makes sense of all worldly systems of power. All governments, all authorities...all political systems are infected by the corrupting influence of the Ruler of this World...including our own American political system. As Christian citizens, we should be involved, we should run for office, we should pray...but we need also remember that for the time being, Satan's rule over this world means that we should be a little suspicious of all human authority structures.

So, to summarize, we live in an overlap world of physical and spiritual realities, including dark spiritual forces. And, according to Jesus, the chief of those dark forces is Satan who has been granted temporary authority over this world. That's bad news. But today, I want to focus on some good news: Christus Victor.

When I use the word "atonement," most of you have some idea of what I mean. It is a theological term to describe an act that pays for one's sin. The dominant atonement theory in Western Christendom is "substitutionary atonement" which holds that Jesus, in his death on the cross, substituted himself for us. He died to pay the price we could not pay for our sin. There is all kinds of biblical support for this. "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness." (1 Peter 2.24) See the substitution?

Substitutionary atonement is a powerful way of understanding what Jesus did for us. But it is not the ONLY way of understanding it. Another theory...which dates back to the fourth

century...is known by a Latin phrase: "Christus Victor;" Conquering Christ. This way of explaining the atonement portrays the life and death of Jesus as a cosmic battle with evil supernatural powers. Jesus defeated the Devil and retrieved us from his clutches.

It is also known as the "Ransom" theory based on Matthew 20:28: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." On the cross, Jesus offers his life as a ransom...as a trade...in exchange for ours. Thus he frees us from spiritual captivity. When Jesus dies, the Devil thinks he has won it all...only to discover three days later that Jesus has been raised from the dead and the Devil has lost it all; both Jesus whom he thought he had killed, AND us captives whom Jesus rescued.

Remember the C.S. Lewis classic, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*? Do you recall the scene where the lion, Aslan, offers himself to the White Witch in exchange for Edmund? He allows himself to be tied to a stone table, shaved, muzzled and killed. Of course, Aslan doesn't stay dead. Edmund is freed, Aslan comes back to life and the Witch is defeated. That is an image of Christus Victor...the conquering Christ who, through his death and resurrection, destroys the evil one and rescues his children.

The very first prophecy in the Bible is an image of Christus Victor. In Genesis 3 after the Serpent tempts Eve, God curses him with these words: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." That is a prediction, way back in Genesis 3, of the eventual victory of Jesus over Satan! The opening scene in *The Passion of the Christ* captures this moment powerfully. Christus Victor!

We also find prophecy in Psalm 110. This is a Messianic Psalm. It is a prophecy that looks ahead hundreds of years to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus. Listen to verse 1: The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool."

That may sound unusual to us, but the people of the New Testament understood exactly what it was predicting. Did you know that this is the most quoted Old Testament passage in the New Testament? Psalm 110 is cited 27 times! It is a picture of God the Father inviting his victorious Son Jesus to take the honored place at his right hand. And this is what Jesus does with his enemy, the Devil. He turns him into an ottoman! In Middle Eastern culture, it is a great insult to show the bottom of your shoes. Remember when someone threw his shoe at President Bush? An enormous insult! This is what Jesus is going to do to Satan. Christus Victor!

And in Colossians 2:15, Paul talks about Christ's victory over Satan and his forces this way. "He disarmed the powers and authorities and made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." In the first century, PIC when a Roman general won a great victory, he would force the defeated king and his family, along with his remaining soldiers...to march through the streets of Rome in front of crowds...often naked. The throngs would mock and shame their defeated foes...and would cheer the triumphant Roman general. This is what Paul says Jesus has done to the Devil! Christus Victor.

The writer of Hebrews repeats the same theme when he declares through his death Jesus has destroyed "... the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and delivered all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery." (Hebrews 2.14-15)

So, it is true that we live in an overlap between the physical and spiritual worlds. It is true that the Devil is the present ruler of this world. But the most important truth of all is this: Christ has crushed the serpent's head! He has made a spectacle of him and his forces and has ransomed us from his clutches. Christus Victor! Hallelujah!

All this was accomplished through the powerful shed blood of Jesus on his cross. And it explains, I think, what occurred around the death of Christ. When he cried, "It is finished" and gave up his spirit, several things happened. Darkness had already fallen over the earth like a giant eclipse. Earthquakes shook the land. Tombs were thrown open and dead saints walked out, into the city and testified to Jesus. Did you remember that?

You know what I think was going on here? These were Satan's death rattles! The death rattle is that rasping breath of a person who is about to die. Satan thought that in killing the Son of God, he would have ultimate victory. He didn't realize that it sealed his own fate. And all of creation...the creation that is temporarily under the cruel boot of the Enemy ...writhed and revolted in that moment its newfound freedom!

In fact, the whole of Jesus' earthly ministry is a glimpse of this epic battle between Christus Victor and Satan. When Jesus urges us to love our enemies instead of hating them...when he welcomed the outsiders and touched the untouchable... when he elevated the powerless and brought down the powerful... when he raised up a dead boy and dead girl and dead man and gave them back to their families...when he commanded evil spirits to loosen their talons on their victims and they shrieked in resentful obedience ...that was just a down payment! A preview of coming attractions! On the cross, Satan's ultimate destiny was sealed. And one day Christus Victor will return and finish the job. Satan and his followers will be bound and thrown into the Lake of Fire, never to bedevil us again.

I was thinking about my identity thief. We can view that as fate; as just a bad person doing bad things. Or we can call it out for what it is: an example of what happens when the Devil...who is a thief and a liar...convinces others to do his bidding. My battle is not with that identity thief who is simply a tool. My battle is against his evil boss.

And when you think about it...aren't ALL the works of the Devil identity theft? Doesn't he want to steal from us our identity as beloved brothers and sisters in Christ? Doesn't he want us to doubt our place in God's family and to live as helpless victims instead of **asserting the authority we have as the redeemed and adopted children of our heavenly Father?**

So...how **DO we claim that identity and assert that authority?** Last week I told you that the first step is to begin to train your spiritual eyes; to look at the circumstances in your life from a new perspective. We **DON'T** believe there is a demon behind every bush. But if your struggle is particularly intense or unremitting or coming from every angle, it wouldn't

hurt for more Christians to say, "Huh...I wonder if something spiritual is going on here!" And if so, we need to respond to it in a different way.

I will deal with this in detail next week, but I want to give you a taste of how we fight back. We fight back...by talking back. We speak directly to the Devil and his forces. Out loud. This is not prayer directed to God...this is language of rebuke that we speak directly to the Evil One...in which we take authority over him in the name of Jesus Christ...and we order him to leave us alone.

Here is how it sounded this week for me. When I was in the midst of the identity theft stuff and feeling overwhelmed by this sermon series and other things I am facing, I opened my spiritual eyes and said, "Huh...I think this is the enemy. This is an attack of the evil one." So, I spoke, out loud, these words: "Satan, in the name of Jesus, I command you to leave me alone. I belong to Jesus. You have no place in my home, my marriage, my children, my finances, my mind or my emotions. In the name of Jesus I order you...leave!" Then I prayed: "Holy Spirit, please fill up every empty space in my life right now." That's it. And I'm telling you...I sensed an immediate change.

I know...a little unusual for us Presbyterians. But if it is true that we have a spiritual enemy...if it is true that Jesus has triumphed over him...and if it is true that we have power and authority in his name...then why wouldn't we want to claim that victory in our own lives? Especially when the forces of evil seem so irresistible at times!

For instance...take a look at [this](#).

Over all the damage and destruction and rubble that the Devil causes in our lives, Christus Victor reigns supreme! "Greater is He that is in me than he that is in the world!"