

The adversary incarnate? (Mark 8:31-38)

We can ignore the Satan stuff, or we can address it.

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“Get behind me, Satan!”

When I use this phrase I use it mostly as a joke. I believe that evil is very real, but I’m not sure that I believe it comes from a literal source like “Satan.” I think evil things happen because human beings make evil choices out of their own free will. End of story.

I grew up in an area where some vocal people believed in the literal devil, though. They believed Satan was tempting us at every turn, trying to lure us astray using everything from rock music to bestselling books.

When I was in seminary, one of their favorite targets was Harry Potter. One Sunday I talked about Harry Potter briefly in a sermon, about how the books give examples of some of the best qualities to which Christian believers can aspire: loyalty, courage, fellowship, perseverance, and love. My congregation had more than a few devoted Harry Potter fans, so it was a fitting comparison for them.

After the service, as I shook hands at the door, an out-of-town visitor berated me for including something so “satanic” in my sermon. She informed me that J.K. Rowling, the author, had been educated at the “London School of Satanism” and that “we weren’t supposed to read those.” The “we” meant Christians.

(I assured her that Rowling was, in fact, a member of the Church of Scotland, and that Presbyterians were not well known for their devil-worshiping ways. I also questioned the existence of a London School of Satanism, though I admitted I had heard of the London School of Economics.)

Truth be told, I'd love to avoid talking about Satan altogether in church, lest I come off sounding like an anti-children's literature crusader. In Lent, though, the word "Satan" makes a lot of appearances. As preachers we have a choice. We can ignore it, or we can address it.

The reframing of "Satan" away from a literal evil figure and toward the more accurate translation of the Greek word as "adversary" has helped me to preach about it. While most moderate-to-progressive Christians can't get behind an understanding of a capital-S "Satan," we can all appreciate that we fight metaphorical demons. But too often, we in the church don't give people room to talk about those adversarial things, and how to put such things behind them.

One of the things Harry Potter taught me is this: "Fear of the name only increases fear of the thing itself." People are so afraid of Voldemort that they call him "he who shall not be named." Their fear does not keep him from destroying them, though. Named or not, the adversary still comes for you.

In Lent I try to name my satans, and to encourage others to do the same. It's only when we can speak out loud the names of all that stands between us and God that we can begin to confront those adversaries.

That's just Defense Against the Dark Arts 101.