

What was Satan doing in the sky in today's Gospel? We know Satan does not dwell in heaven, but in hell. We've probably read Dante and C.S. Lewis' masterpiece *The Screwtape Letters*. Both works aim to describe Satan's hell. And whether hell is organized as Dante saw it or Lewis, we know it to be in some nether region. Satan hangs out somewhere below humankind, where it is dark and dank, where it is full of torment, where Satan is king and lord, delighting in the evils of humanity. We've been fed a steady literary diet of this sort of thing. So why does Jesus have a vision of Satan falling from heaven in today's Gospel? Was he referring to the Great War in heaven between God's loyal angels and the angels of rebellion?

Probably not. Those kinds of stories hadn't been written then, and most scholars assert those kinds of stories reflect an ancient Persian cultural influence. Instead, Jesus was most likely referring to a more Jewish understanding of Satan. Perhaps like in the book of Job where Satan was with God when he wasn't observing humankind. If you remember, Satan was one of God's angels who had the role of accusing a person during judgment. It was Satan's role to notice and bring to God's attention the sins of a person. In the book of Job, it was Satan who caused the suffering of humankind, not God, out of curiosity to see what it might take for someone to turn against God and blame God for their misery.

In ancient Jewish belief, Satan didn't dwell in a dark underground. Nor did Satan walk among the people on the earth like Jesus. Satan was in a region of the sky, nearer to heaven than earth, symbolizing a barrier between people and the love of God. Satan was what came between people and God. So, when Jesus described his vision of Satan falling from heaven in today's Gospel, he was expressing his joy at hearing of the success of the returning missionaries he had sent out to bring peace and to proclaim the good news that God's kingdom was near. Because of that mission's success, the author of Luke's Gospel is telling us, the barrier between people and God was falling down, and the rest of Jesus' mission would destroy any barrier between God and people forever.

What made the mission of the 70 successful wasn't that they returned with 70 or 700 additional followers of Jesus. This was not a mission about getting more people. The mission was not successful because the 70 did not return with money or other gifts. This was not a mission about raising money. Jesus made that clear when he sent the 70 out with no pocket money, and nothing of value they could sell for money or use to buy

people's trust or look like they were self-sufficient or affluent. They went out vulnerable, the only things of value they carried was the peace of the Lord already within them and the good news that God's Kingdom is near.

And that is what made the mission successful. Whether they were welcomed or not, whether they performed miracles of healing or not, whether or not they wiped the dust from their feet, they gave the same message to everyone they encountered: God's Kingdom has come near. Jesus rejoiced that the 70 proclaimed the message, and it was that message that brought Satan down. It is a step toward Jesus' mission to destroy forever any barrier that separated or sought to separate all people from God and God's tremendous love.

That evil and its influence is still around does not indicate any failure on Jesus' part or the missionaries he sent out. There are still plenty of people who choose to reject the Good News of Christ, and choose to reject God's love, who choose the ways of fear, scarcity, power, selfishness. There are those who would rather hurt others and lick their wounds of self-righteousness than forgive. There are those who feel winning is superior to the welfare of all and keeping others down is the only way for them to be lifted up.

The wonder of Jesus' resurrection is we don't have to let those kinds of behaviors or mindsets prohibit us from experiencing and showing the Love of God in Christ. We don't have to be afraid of the powers and principalities of the world. One of the things the mission of the 70 disciples showed us is that God's Kingdom is not an exclusive club meant only for the elite, for those intelligent enough, cultured enough, attractive enough, wealthy enough, powerful enough. God's Kingdom was proclaimed to everyone, even those who rejected it. We all are welcome in God's Kingdom, no matter our age, race, gender, color, sexual orientation, gender identity, socio-economic status, education, or even our failings, or our pain, the Kingdom of God is near us all.

This message is as needed and relevant today as it was when Jesus sent out the 70 all those years ago. There are people who are lonely, afraid, who do not feel part of anything. There are people who are certain they are not loved by God, just as there are people who are certain they can tell you who God does and does not love. In these times when isolation and tribalism are as fashionable as they are pandemic, the gift of God's Peace and the Good News that God's Kingdom is near can be the healing and refreshment our world thirsts for.

Which is why even though it is summertime, and many of us are busy with all the stuff of the season, perhaps we can also remember that part of our calling as followers of Jesus is, no matter the season, to offer ourselves, wherever we find ourselves, as messengers of God's Peace and to articulate the Good News of God's Kingdom being

present. We can offer God's Peace, not just as part of our service in a few moments, but to everyone we meet. Remember the peace of Christ isn't necessarily proselytizing, it is wishing someone well-being. Some might reject it, but others might accept that peace and happily share it with us. For example: One day, I was walking to the church from Baker Center, and greeting the people I encountered on the sidewalk, like I always do. Quite a few ignored me. Others nodded their heads politely. I experience that all the time. And every once in a while, someone will get a light in their eyes and greet me back. On that particular day, a young woman wearing a lovely hijab, the kind that covers most of the face except for the eyes, responded with a light in her eyes and a warm greeting when I said hello. I didn't need to see her mouth to recognize she was smiling. We both were sharing a peace that was more than politeness, it was genuine friendliness. The kind that breaks down barriers. It was beautiful. It was joyful. It was simple. And sometimes, that is all it takes to share peace.

Sharing the Good News of God's Kingdom can be just as simple. Here at Church of the Good Shepherd we can get creative with how we proclaim God is Present. We've said it with a TARDIS, we say it with the open chapel doors, we say it when we serve our neighbors a meal at noon, we say it with the coffee we serve at our coffee shop ministry, especially when someone who cannot pay for their coffee or tea can have that cup of coffee or tea because of the pay-it-forward program, we say it when we give away coffee and donuts on the first day of classes and we say it on Ash Wednesday during Ashes-to-Go. These are wonderful ways we share the Good News that God's Kingdom is near. The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, the Rt. Rev. Michael Curry, is a powerful witness of the Love of God present through his preaching and his books. And yet we also need to remember what Jesus said in today's Gospel: the harvest is plentiful, and the laborers are few. We can't let only the professionals like Bishop Curry and our programs here at church do the proclaiming. We are all needed to proclaim, as best we can, with our lives and our words, that God's Kingdom is near, that God is present. Remember, it wasn't the results of the mission that made it successful in today's Gospel, it was the doing of it, sharing the peace and proclaiming the Good News, that gave Jesus joy and caused the barriers to fall.

We can all do it. We don't need money or nice clothes or prestige. We don't need clever swag to give away. Our goal need not be to bring friends to church, although that is a good thing to do. Our goal is just to proclaim the Good News. One way former Archbishop Desmond Tutu does it, as he describes in *The Book of Joy* co-written with the Dalai Lama, is that when he gets cut off while driving in traffic he does not curse or condemn the other driver, he gets out of their way, says out loud they must have an emergency or need to get somewhere very fast, and then says a prayer for their safety. That is how he makes room in the Kingdom of God for the person who cut him off in traffic. When someone tries to take advantage of others, we can proclaim of the

Kingdom of God by stepping in and working to make the situation fair for all. When we see a post on social media that brings out our inner cynic, we can refrain from making a snarky comment and instead find a better way to respond. It might not get as many likes, but popularity isn't the point when proclaiming God's Kingdom, love is. These are just a few suggestions, I am sure all of you, in your own lives and situations will find just as simple and just as beautiful ways to show God's Kingdom is near, that there is nothing that can separate us from God's Love in Christ, and whether or not you are heard, you will have brought peace and joy to the world.