

THE RULER OF THE POWER OF THE AIR

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Psalm 107:1-19; Ephesians 2:1-10

I have never been too much of a fan of science fiction. Maybe it was the original version of *2001: A Space Odyssey* that put me off... that computer "Hal" going haywire and turning against the humans; and in retrospect wasn't that a prophetic film -artificial intelligence taking over the world?

Or possibly it was *Alien* that did me in; that horrible creature bursting open from the chest of John Hurt and making incredible gooey slimy sounds.

I was never much into the *Twilight* vampire series either. And even comic book heroes like Spiderman and the Black Panther are not quite my favorite fantasy trips.

I know when I got turned off sci-fi - it was a movie called *War of the Worlds* and I was seven years old when the first version of it came out on the screen. There was a remake with Tom Cruise in 2005, and I really think that movie was what did me in for sci-fi. It was creepy, and the invaders made these strange screaming sounds that penetrated your head sort of like working in the American embassy in Havana.

Sci-fi is always to some extent an expression of our deepest fears, a kind of Jungian expression of the shadowy side of our imagination. It is almost always a projection of what is evil. Which is why I am amazed to find a sci-fi image embedded in the Ephesians passage we read today.

Paul, or more likely someone writing with Paul's quill, writes to the Ephesians these words of correction and scorn,

You were dead [he says] through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, *following the ruler of the power of the air*, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.

It's not hard to guess who that prince, that ruler of the power of the air is. In good old theological terms, it's Satan, the Evil One, the Devil, the power of the Prince of Darkness grim (to borrow a phrase from Martin Luther).

Paul's understudy goes on to explain, "But... all of that has now changed because by grace you have been saved and raised up with God, and seated with God in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus."

Ephesians has a lot of phrases that are familiar and ones that no doubt our confirmation class this morning dusted and blew off to see what spoke and what didn't, even words in the Ephesians text we read today... words like "by grace you've been saved by faith, and a number of other theological buzz phrases that litter this text – "trespass" and "sin" and "mercy."

But the Ruler of the Power of the Air is a fresh image, one we don't think about very often. What Steven Spielberg could do with that! It is, after all the only time that the phrase and that image appears in the Bible.

"Air" is not a common theological word in the New Testament. What little there is to say about air does not link it to evil in other passages outside of Ephesians.

"Air" is a reference to futility in I Corinthians 9:26 where Paul refers to "box[ing] as though beating the air," and in I Corinthians 14:9 where Paul refers to "speaking into the air," a futility that every preacher knows every now and then. In I Thessalonians 4, Paul describes a rapture-like scene when he says that the chosen will be caught up in the clouds "to meet the Lord in the air." A phrase that our Rapture literalists take as justification for a set of beliefs that are way too literal for me.

The letter to the Ephesians has a kind of up and down binary verticality. Maybe that's why in Lent with a cross that lies at the end of these days, there is an upward and a downward vertical direction that mimics and makes literal that cross where Jesus dies.

In the strictest of 1st century Biblical terms, “up” is where heaven is located and God too, for that matter. While “down” is where *we* are located and in order to get the two to intersect it requires some kind of bridging to cross the boundaries. That's where Jesus comes in.

But here's the problem, aside from the fact that we have trouble these days envisioning heaven to be up, and the earth or the underworld or hell to be below. what do we do if the direction of our salvation is itself infected with this sinister Ruler of the Power of the Air? How do you map that, confirmation class?

I was fascinated with the visuals that you chose to express what Jesus looked like. A whole wall of the parlor with paintings and expressions of what Jesus looked like and how people have imagined him. You have to make some decisions about Jesus and how to portray him in order to draw him. And what about some of the other images you were tossing around so comfortably or uncomfortably in your confirmation class?

Is heaven really up and earth down? Where are these heavenly places this passage talks about? And where do we locate Jesus, somewhere *between* heaven and earth?

In the story of the Ascension we say that Jesus went up into the heavens after his resurrection. But with our understandings of space and the expansive universe, what are we to do with these terms and locations that don't work for us very well anymore?

The Bible has a kind of three decker universe in mind. Heaven above, earth beneath, and an underworld beneath the earth. But all of it is shot through with our limited ability to express in earthbound language a mystery and a truth that is not just about where good and evil are located, as if our lives could be pinned on a map, but rather a mystery about how evil and good are linked in an inextricable way in this life, and how difficult it is to speak of anything that is purely good.

Maybe we need to look for God not in spatial terms, trying to find a place where God is, so much as to imagine that there is no place where God is not, that God is all around us, within us, and beyond us; that all our categories for locating God fail except for one. The real prince of the power of the universe is not the Prince of the Air, but the Prince of Peace, the Lord of all that is and ever shall be, world without end.

I know, there is no getting around the abundant evidence that there is plenty of evil mixed in this world with the good. Maybe the writer of Ephesians is right, there is a ruler of the power of the air who rivals the power of God's love... rivals, but does not finally defeat.

When your school is not a safe place to learn as the students of the Stoneman Douglas High School learned recently... When a man with PTSD can walk into a VA hospital and shoot three hostages who were trying to help him... when a wily dictator with a weird haircut can test ballistic missiles that can reach Seoul and Honolulu and Los Angeles and New York... when women are objectified and taken for granted, seen only as sexual objects and not honored as the persons they are, there is ample evidence that good and evil are all mixed up in this imperfect world...

Recently I learned from a friend about a controversy that is going on in one of our Presbyterian seminaries. In the library of the Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Texas there is an oil portrait of Robert Lewis Dabney.¹

For years he taught at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia (back in the days when it was located in Hampden Sydney) and, at about the same time Union was establishing its new campus (in the late 19th century) in Richmond. Dabney eventually migrated to Austin where he became Professor of Philosophy at the University of Texas.

While he was there, he and a pastor at what is now Central Presbyterian Church in Austin, Richmond K. Smoot (a graduate of Union and probably a student of Dabney's), began teaching theology to aspiring pastors in a kind of apprenticeship model in Smoot's parlor.

This went on for more than a decade and Smoot and Dabney finally parted ways and not long after Dabney died.

Austin Seminary as we know it now was founded after this period, in 1902, but there was great indebtedness to Dabney and Smoot as early mentors in what became Austin Seminary; and early faculty members were deeply indebted to Dabney.

Robert Lewis Dabney was an irascible and highly-opinionated man. In the 19th century, Presbyterian theology in America was primarily articulated by Dabney and a handful of other theologians, known as Old School or Old Light theologians, and they were the most important American Reformed thinkers of that century.

Now here is the hard part, the mixing of good and evil. Dabney was a Virginian and a slave-owner. He was the chaplain to Stonewall Jackson during the Civil War, an unrepentant states-rights Southerner and an embittered foe of the post-Civil War reunion of the Union and the Confederate States of America.

He was a promoter of an idea after the War that plantation owners move their whole operation (including former slaves, then called "indentured servants") to Brazil, and in fact a number of them did.

Dabney himself did not join them there, but the "Conferados" as they were known did establish two towns in Brazil, and even today one can drive in and around those towns and see antebellum church buildings that look for all the world like Methodist country churches in Alabama with cemeteries around them featuring tombstones bearing Confederate "stars and bars" from that period.

Dabney tried to get Robert E. Lee's investment in this project, but Lee would have nothing to do with it. Dabney never reconciled himself to the New South.

Ultimately, he died in Victoria, TX, and his body was taken by train back to Hampden Sydney where he was buried in the seminary graveyard there.

Dabney was also an architect, and designed a number of antebellum Presbyterian churches generally reflecting the architecture of the Federal period. He was a moderator of the Southern Presbyterian Church General Assembly. He never saw the official formation of Austin Seminary, but his influence was undeniable in its early couple of decades.

Now many on the Austin campus would like to see Dabney's portrait removed from the seminary library.

But other voices have been raised to place next to Dabney's portrait framed photographs of the first African-American student to matriculate at Austin, the first African American student to graduate, the first Hispanic student, the first woman, and so on, along with a framed copy of a new diversity-related covenant written by students now at the seminary. It would be a sort of time-line showing the complicity of racism and one institution's attempt to move out of it.

All across our country these days there is a movement to erase the sin and human frailty of people who have been until this time revered. They (and we) suffer from what John Calvin, the Reformer whose teaching became the basis of Presbyterianism, ...what Calvin called the total depravity of people who, up until this time have been remembered only for the one dimensional and incomplete image that has been projected onto them while ignoring their human imperfection and frailty.

Among them are schools and statues and memorials remembering Woodrow Wilson at Princeton University. statues of Robert E. Lee in Richmond and in Charlottesville. an oil portrait of Robert Lewis Dabney in the seminary in Austin, Texas.

I make no defense for their racism, their shortcomings, their limitations. But do we really think that we do a service to those who will come after us if we do not remember both the good and the evil that is mixed together in all our humanity?

I don't know whether in your confirmation class you discussed Calvin's teaching about total depravity, which is to say the fallen nature of humanity, the awkward presence in the world of both the Prince of the Power of the Air and the ruler who is the Prince of Peace, but I would not want you to think that you could make it this far and not know that the world is a mixed bag. No human, save one, has ever been flawless, sinless, perfect... and confirmation will most decidedly not perfect you. But it will make and mark you as God's own, as you were in baptism made and marked as God's own. Loved, forgiven, welcome, a part of the family imperfect as you are, as we all are.

Cindy Jarvis, writing in *The Christian Century* says,

The distasteful thing about total depravity, on the one hand, is the unfair way it paints us all with the same harsh brush. On the other hand, according to Marilynne Robinson, "The belief that we are all sinners gives us excellent grounds for forgiveness and self-forgiveness, and is kindlier than any expectation that we might be saints, even while it affirms the standards that all of us fail to attain." It is the opposite of saying there are some good folks, who are white supremacists. It says instead that, when we consider the love for which we were made, all of us stand in equal need of mercy.²

That sounds like me too.³

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¹ Ted Wardlaw, President of Austin Seminary has offered this detailed remembrance of Dabney and a discussion of the movement to both erase and to salvage Dabney's story by contextualization.

² Cindy Jarvis, "I can't even remember the names of all the men on my #ChurchToo list," in the Christian Century, December 21, 2017.

³ Matthew Gaventa ends his Moveable Feast paper on this text (unpublished) by quoting Cindy Jarvis' article in the Christian Century and this same closing line.