

The Cosmology of Evil

1. Warm up: Last week, NASA astronauts flew around the dark side of the moon taking breath-taking photos with a clarity never seen before. If you were offered the chance to tag along on a flight to the moon, would you? Why or why not?
2. On Sunday we began a new sermon series called “the Dark Side of Spiritual Life.” Just like scientists need to know what’s on the dark side of the moon to truly understand the moon, so too we need to explore and understand the dark side of spiritual life. In this series we’ll discuss things like Satan, demons, sin, and hell. Jeff noted that some churches seem to become obsessed with the dark side of spiritual life, perhaps because they use fear as a way to control or motivate people. Have you ever been in a church that emphasized the negative? If so, how did that feel? How did it affect you?
3. At LifeJourney we focus on the positive – after all, the Gospel is Good News! But from time-to-time, we do need to consider the dark side of things. So on Sunday we launched into our new sermon series by exploring the Biblical cosmology of evil. In other words, we explored what the Bible teaches us about the nature of evil and how it operates in the cosmos. We began by considering whether thoughtful 21st century believers should believe in the existence of angels. Jeff defined angels as “higher life forms that influence and impact us in subtle but significant ways.”
 - a. How confident are you in the existence of angels? If you believe in angels, why? If you don’t, why?
 - b. Jeff laid out two reasons why he believes in angels. One of those reasons is grounded in the diversity of God’s creation. In the part of the cosmos we can see, God has created an enormous diversity of creatures with all different levels of complexity and sophistication, ranging from simple single-cell amebas all the way up the food chain to us humans. Based on this pattern, Jeff suggested, it’s logical to believe that God didn’t stop with humans, but has also created levels of creatures even more sophisticated and complex than us. How does that argument sit with you? Do you find it persuasive? Why or why not?
 - c. Jeff also cited empirical evidence for the existence of angels, noting that human experience, past and present, is replete with encounters with angels. By way of example, he shared a story of a woman who was literally touched by an angel while singing in the choir – an angel that she felt, but couldn’t see, even as someone else in the congregation independently saw the angel. Have you ever had an encounter with an angel or known someone who did? What happened?
 - d. What do you make of all the human experiences of angelic encounters. Do you find that kind of empirical evidence persuasive? Why or why not?
4. If angels exist – i.e., if there are higher life forms in the cosmos that influence and impact us in subtle but significant ways – the next question becomes: What are angels like? In

particular, Jeff asked us to consider whether angels have free will. Since God gave us humans free will, Jeff suggested, it makes sense that God would also give free will to an even higher level of beings like angels. And if angels have free will, it seems likely that at least some of them are bound to make bad choices and rebel against God. That's the traditional Christian understanding of the origin of Satan, based on Biblical passages like Isaiah 14:12-16. Let's read that passage again together, as printed on p. 3.

- a. Isaiah 14, like many prophetic passages, has traditionally been understood to have a double meaning. On one level, Isaiah is describing an earthly prince, but in the process, he also ends up describing the fall of Satan. Based on what Isaiah says in this passage, what were Satan's motivations for rebelling against God?
 - b. Isaiah 14 is often read in conjunction with Revelation 12:3, which says, "Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon . . . [whose] tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth." Since stars were often associated with angels in ancient times, this passage has traditionally been read as indicating that a third of the angels have joined Satan in his rebellion, thereby becoming what we call "fallen angels" or "demons." Why do you think so many angels would rebel against a good and loving God? What might have been the psychology behind their rebellion? By way of analogy, does our human rejection of Jesus when he came to earth offer any clues or insights?
 - c. Often demons are portrayed as the kind of creatures who know they're evil and love being evil. Jeff challenged that view. He said, "I'm confident the angels who've joined Satan have rationalized what they do and are convinced they're fighting for a good cause. Just like even Hitler rationalized that ridding the world of Jews, Gypsies, and Gays was a good thing." Your thoughts? Do you think it's possible that even demons believe they're fighting for a good and just cause?
5. If fallen angels exist, and if they can adversely impact us in subtle, but significant ways, that raises another question: Why does a good God let them continue to exist? Why wouldn't God destroy them? By way of explanation, Jeff used the analogy of a time when he and David brought two dogs into their home to the consternation of their three cats. Many times, Jeff said, their cats must have wondered, "Why would our loving Daddies let those doggies come into our home and torment us? Why wouldn't they get rid of them?" The answer, of course, is because Jeff and David loved the doggies too. Based on passages like I John 4:8 and II Peter 3:9, Jeff suggested that God loves demons (fallen angels) just as much as God loves us and that God is patiently waiting and hoping the demons will someday repent and find their way back to the light. Jeff even suggested we should pray for Satan and the demons, based on Matthew 5:44. How does this explanation of why God doesn't destroy fallen angels sit with you? Do you find it persuasive? Why or why not?

Last question on next page . . .

6. We ended Sunday's sermon by considering why it's important to understand the Biblical cosmology of evil. Jeff said it's because, when we embrace this Biblical understanding, it causes us to realize that evil is not some amorphous, passive, abstract force, but rather

something that is *alive and therefore active, intelligent, and strategic*. He compared it to how we would respond if a lion were loose in our neighborhood. I Peter 5:8. The Biblical view of evil as active, intelligent, and strategic heightens our awareness of the power of evil to entrap us and, thus, causes us to be far more alert.

- a. With all this in mind, read the excerpt from an article by Kay Warren, as printed below, then share your thoughts and feelings about what she says.
- b. Jeff said, “Evil is not something bad people do. It’s something good people fall into.” Kay Warren asserts that, under the right circumstances, each of us is capable of falling into great evil. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Isaiah 14:12-16

¹² How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! ¹³ You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit on the mount of assembly on the heights of the assembly in the far north; ¹⁴ I will ascend to the tops of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High!’

¹⁵ But you are brought down to Sheol, to the depths of the Pit. ¹⁶ Those who see you will stare at you, and ponder over you, saying, ‘Is this the one who made the earth tremble, who shook kingdoms?’

Kay Warren, writing in Christianity Today

The first time I visited Rwanda, I went looking for monsters. . . . I [was aware of] the 1994 genocide that had left one million dead – tortured, raped, viciously murdered – and somehow I thought it would be easy to spot the perpetrators. I naively assumed I’d be able to look men and women in the eyes and tell if they had been involved. I was full of self-righteous judgment.

What I found left me puzzled, confused, and ultimately frightened. Instead of finding leering, menacing creatures, I met men and women who looked and behaved a lot like me. They took care of their families, went to work, chatted with their neighbors, laughed, cried, prayed, and worshiped. Where were all the monsters? Where were all the evildoers capable of heinous acts? Slowly, with a deepening sense of dread, I began to understand the truth: There were no monsters in Rwanda, just people like you and me.

Before that trip, I can’t tell you the number of times I reacted to evil I read about or witnessed by saying, “I would *never* do that!” But thousands of years of bloody human history prove differently. My own history proves differently. We’re all proficient in our ability to conceive, plan, and execute evil. Of course, we don’t call it evil when we’re the ones involved. As French writer La Rochefoucauld observed, “There is hardly a person clever enough to realize the full extent of the evil they do.” So we might as well face the . . . truth: You and I, put in the right situation, will do absolutely anything. Given the right circumstances, I am capable of any sin.”