

## **GHOSTBUSTERS**

***A sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, May 8, 2016***

***based on Colossians 1:11-13, II Cor 4:6, I Peter 2:9***

The sermon this morning is the final sermon in a five-part sermon series entitled “Christ versus the Powers of Evil.”

You may remember the original Ghostbusters movie that came out three decades ago, and now there is a new Ghostbusters film appearing this summer. In Ghostbusters, the scenario (in both the old film and the new) is that there are a bunch of nasty spiritual entities moving all over the place, creating havoc, and those dark powers are confronted by a group of very imperfect individuals who call themselves the Ghostbusters. The Ghostbusters are weak and flawed, but they’ve got some gifts and some special equipment, and with a lot of spunk they prevail in the end. Ghostbusters is a comedy, but it connects in an interesting way with the serious theme of this sermon series. During this series we have noted that there are powers of evil at work in the world. The people who confront those powers—namely you and me—may be weak and flawed; and yet we can be equipped by Christ to stand firm against evil and finally to be part of God’s answer to it.

The Ghostbusters theme also connects nicely with Mother’s Day. Mothers with small children inevitably confront the situation that their children are afraid of scary things in the dark; and mothers literally become ghostbusters, as they must drive away the fears from their children. As children get older, they have fewer imaginary troubles, and more real ones; and so parenting through the years involves a continual effort to ward off troubles that may afflict a family. As Christians, we recognize further that we are a part of a much larger family, the family of God, and that we have an overarching calling to drive out evil from the world at large.

But how exactly can we do that? In the Ghostbusters movie, a key advantage that the Ghostbusters have is that they understand the spiritual nature of their situation, and likewise, in a far more real way, the Bible enables us to understand our true situation. During this sermon series so far, we have lifted up some key Biblical truths:

First—there are powers of evil at work in the world. It would be nice if the dark powers were the sort of silly ghosts featured in Ghostbusters. We encounter more serious negative forces that can create havoc in our world and tear us down in life.

Secondly—the dark powers gain entry into us because of our human sinfulness, our separation from God, and the dark powers draw strength from our human sin. During this series we have seen radical Islamist terrorism as a prime, though extreme, example of how the powers of evil work. People become drawn into terrorism because in their weakness and sin they are susceptible to the lure of terrorist ideology, and then once they become terrorists they add to the power of evil that unfolds through a terrorist movement. So there is a constant interplay between our sin and the power of evil.

But here you may ask the question, “Where does evil come from in the first place?” The whole scenario is well portrayed in the opening pages of the Bible. In the story of Adam and Eve, the power of evil is portrayed in the serpent—there is a force of temptation pulling at the man and woman. Adam and Eve choose to give in to that temptation—they fall into sin—and this allows evil to gain a grip on them and work in a destructive way in them. There we see the interplay of sin and evil. But there is an important backstory before the story of Adam and Eve; it is the story of creation in Genesis 1 and 2.

It starts with nothing, there is only darkness. [*The earth was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep Genesis 2:2*] and then God creates, and what God creates is consistently defined as good. [*And God said, “Let there be light . . . and the light was good. Genesis 1:3-4*] The good stands over against the nothing that was; but the very process of God calling forth *what is* creates a new sort of dynamic with *what is not*.

At the beginning of creation, God creates light, so now we have light, as opposed to the darkness that was. The very creation of light now gives to its negation—darkness—a new kind of reality; because although darkness is still actually nothing—it is just the absence of light—it is now experienced by us as something quite real in contrast to the light. If you go outside on a very dark night, you do not say, “Well, this darkness does not exist; it is only the absence of light.” The darkness is real, and potentially a serious problem, even though it consists of nothing at all.

Christian theologians through the centuries have recognized in this sort of dynamic the basic origin of evil. God, according to Genesis, creates good—the good is everything that glorifies God and that builds us up and connects us with God. But the very creation of good gives a new kind of reality to the negation of good—namely, everything that would tear us down and draw us away from God. Evil is everything that would tear us down and draw us away from God. In terms of the whole order of being—what God has created—evil is nothing. God does not create evil; evil is a negation of good. But it is very real, just as darkness is real.

Thus evil, the shadow side of reality, has been a part of the fabric of things since the beginning. As God creates human beings, God creates us to live in God’s light—we can join with God in loving and creating; indeed we join with God in creating other human beings, something we celebrate in motherhood. In short, we can join with God in creating more good, which puts us at the pinnacle of God’s creative activity. But the human freedom and power to do all this also means that we can fall away from God. We can forget God and go our own way and separate ourselves from God, a condition the Bible calls sin. So human beings fall from God’s light into the darkness, where they become affected by all sorts of negative forces, and can actually become part of those negative forces, acting contrary to God and tearing down what God has done. We see it in the news all the time. It is little wonder that the Bible describes human beings in their sinful condition as “people who dwell in a land of deep darkness.” [Isaiah 9:2]

So if the evil in the world is analogous to darkness, and sinful human beings are dwelling in darkness, how do you get rid of the darkness? How do you get rid of evil?

A common human tendency is to think that the way to defeat evil is to smash the bad guys out there. This is what we see in movies like Ghostbusters, or in many other films, where the answer to evil is to somehow blast those nasty creatures of the dark. But if you try to get rid of the darkness by blasting the people who are sitting in darkness, you just end up with more darkness. Indeed you can never overcome darkness by trying in some way to smash the darkness. Darkness is a negative, a privation; you can smash away all you want and it is still there.

The way to overcome darkness is with light. For example, our church parking lot would be a very dark place at night, but in fact it is very navigable, because we've got parking lot lights all over the place. The way to overcome darkness is to create points of light shining in the darkness; and this is what God does in the world, as God through Jesus Christ shines the light of his grace in us. The apostle Paul used exactly this imagery in the passage we heard earlier: "It is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness' who has shone in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (II Cor. 4:6) Through Christ, we are forgiven and reconciled to God, and filled with God's Spirit, so that God's goodness can work in us and truly shine in us, and we then are called to become beacons of God's light in the world. So Jesus said to his follows, "Let your light shine" (Matthew 5:16), and Peter said, "You are now God's own people, so that you may proclaim the wonders of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." (I Peter 2:9)

Evil, in short, is overcome with good. At times, it may seem that the evil in the world is greater than the good, and we may feel quite inadequate as we confront the forces of darkness. But light will overwhelm the darkness. As the gospel of John put it, speaking of the light of Christ, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness could not overcome it." (John 1:5) As we put our trust in Christ, we can know that the goodness of God will ultimately prevail, and we can be part of that triumph as we let God's goodness shine in and through us.

All these themes are reflected in our Children's Choir musical (*done at the 10:30 hour*). The musical sees the Biblical story as a narrative about very imperfect human beings who nevertheless become a part of God's great purposes which culminate in Jesus Christ. We ourselves can share in that story, as so live out the prayer the Paul spoke in that passage from Colossians: "May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from His glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He rescues us from the power of darkness and transfers us into the Kingdom of His beloved Son." (Col. 1:11-13)