

## **Hospitality and Comfort**

*Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast*

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### **Genesis 3:1-7**

The snake was shrewder than all the animals the LORD God made. And it said to the woman, "Even though God said, 'You are not to eat from all the trees in the garden —'"

"We eat fruit from the trees in the garden," the woman said to the snake. "But fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden — God said, 'You are not to eat any of that and you are not to touch it, or you will die.'"

And the snake said to the woman, "You're not going to die! God knows that when you eat any of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, knowing good and evil."

The woman saw that the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eye, and desirable for gaining wisdom. And she took some of its fruit, and she ate. She also gave some to her man, who was with her, and he ate. And the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together, and they made coverings for themselves.

### **John 8:31-47**

Then Jesus said to the Jews who had faith in him, "If you continue in my word, then you truly are my disciples. And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

They replied, "We are Abraham's descendants. We've never been anyone's slaves. How can you say, 'You will be free?'"

Jesus replied, "I'm telling you the truth, everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin. A slave is not always part of a household; a son always is. So if the son sets you free, you will really be free. I know that you are Abraham's descendants. But you're looking to kill me, because my word isn't getting anywhere with you. I speak about what I've seen at the Father's side. So you, too, do what you've heard from the Father."

They replied, "Our father is Abraham."

Jesus told them, "If you are Abraham's children, do what Abraham did. But here you are looking to kill me, a person who has told you the truth, which I heard from God. Abraham didn't do that. You're doing what your father did."

Then they said, "We're not illegitimate! We have one father: God."

Jesus said, "If God were your Father, you would love me, because I came from God, and here I am. I didn't come on my own; he sent me. Why don't you understand what I'm saying? Because you can't hear my word. You are from your father the devil, and

you want to act out your father's desires. He has been a murderer from the beginning. And he doesn't stand in the truth, because there's no truth in him. Whenever he tells a lie, he's speaking his own language, because he is a liar, the father of falsehood. And since I tell the truth, you don't believe me.

Which one of you accuses me of sin? If I'm telling the truth, why don't you believe me? Whoever is from God hears what God says. This is why you don't hear, because you aren't from God.

## **Sermon**

For several weeks now, I've made the case that various works of God are expressions of divine hospitality. In creation, God makes a place for us. By providence, God makes sure we have what we need. Through covenant faithfulness, God keeps the welcome mat out for us. And by adoption, God makes us part of the family. Today, in a final installment, I want to talk about hospitality and comfort.

**HOSPITALITY AND COMFORT** go together. It's a basic part of hospitality to see to it that your guests are comfortable. That means fresh fruit in the kitchen, plenty of towels in the bathroom, and extra blankets in the bedroom.

But comfort runs deeper than that, especially in a dangerous world. A couple of weeks ago, I mentioned a *National Geographic* reporter who was staying in a remote village on the Chechnya-Georgia frontier. It was a risky place to be. But her hosts promised that she would be protected come what may. That's comfort.

The *Heidelberg Catechism* begins by asking, "What is your only comfort in life and in death?" I can assure you, the Catechism is not thinking about fresh fruit, soft towels, and warm blankets. And it's certainly not thinking about a chocolate mint strategically placed atop a hotel room pillow. No, the Catechism is thinking about a more robust comfort. It's thinking about the kind of comfort we need in a dangerous world, a world filled with enemies, a world of enslaving tyrannies, a world of falsehood and fear.

**MIKHAIL ASKED ME ONCE** why I don't talk about the devil in my sermons. To be honest, I don't think about the devil all that much. Maybe I should. In *The Screwtape Letters*, CS Lewis warned that there are "two equal and opposite errors" when it comes to the devil. The first is not to believe that the devil exists. The second is to believe, but to pay too much attention to the devil. I don't think I've made either of those mistakes.

People sometimes refer to "practical atheism." That's when, regardless of what we tell ourselves, we live as if there is no God. I've decided that there's also such a thing as practical "there-is-no-devilism." That's when, regardless of what we tell ourselves, we live as if there is no devil. That's where I spend most of my time. But there have been moments.

**IT'S NOT UNUSUAL FOR A CHURCH** to be a very insular community. Churches can be so wrapped up in themselves that they have no room for anyone else. The church I served in Michigan tended to be like that. But things were changing. Church members were getting interested in our neighbors. Church members were starting ministries that reached out to our neighbors and welcomed them into the church. You could see rays of light shining among us that had never shined before.

Then the church blew apart. In ways that made no logical sense. In ways seemingly impossible to sort through. In ways completely resistant to cure. Jan and I and many others were dumbstruck by it. We just couldn't make sense of what was going on. Sister Elizabeth Reis, a dear and precious servant of God – Sister Elizabeth opened our eyes. It was the devil at work. The devil laying waste what God was building. The devil telling lies. The devil seeking to kill off new life before it had a chance to take root.

Like I said, I don't think about the devil all that much. I never have. But I knew Sister Elizabeth was right. I knew the devil was on the loose. The killer. The liar. The father of falsehood. Lying, scheming, killing, laying waste. That's what the devil always does. That's one of the lessons of the Bible's first stories.

**MIKHAIL ASKED ME** about the devil. And well he should. And well any of us should. Because the devil is at work on city streets and in suburban cul-de-sacs. The devil is at work on faraway battlefields and in human hearts. The lies! The death-dealing! The stealing away of hope! The fear!

The devil is a tyrant. The book of Hebrews says that the devil holds people in slavery, slavery to the fear of death (cf. Hebrews 2:14-15). The devil, of course, is a partner in crime with the power of sin. Together they enslave people, enslave communities, enslave entire nations.

When there's blood on the streets and everyone is a victim, what is that but the work of sin and the devil? When armies are on the move and battle lines are drawn in a kill or be killed struggle, what is that but the work of sin and the devil? When young children are assaulted by their mentors, by their protectors, what is that but the work of sin and the devil?

The Catechism says we have three "sworn enemies — the devil, the world, and our own flesh," and those enemies "never stop attacking us" (A 127). The devil is a promiscuous foe. The devil will side with any and every power in order to cripple and destroy what God is building, in order to cripple and destroy the people of God.

He will tell us that war is peace. That murder is life. That slavery to sin is freedom from law. He will tell us that everything is okay, when it's not. He will tell us just what we want to hear, spinning webs of deception to hold us captive to an upside-down view of the world. The devil will convince coaches and administrators at a university that they handled a problem by ignoring it, by sweeping it under a rug. The devil will

convince me that my anger is justified. The devil will convince a nation that vengeance is in order. That if we take up the weapons of evil, we will be able to eliminate evil.

The devil will convince us that Jesus couldn't possibly have meant what he said when he commended the poor and the meek, the merciful and the peacemakers. In the first stories of the Bible, the serpent says, "Did God really say . . . ?" (cp. Genesis 3:1). Then he says, "No. Never mind what God said. Let me tell you how things really are" (cp. Genesis 3:4-5). The devil keeps using the same strategy today, until we let economists and patriots tell us what Jesus meant.

**SO WHAT HOPE IS THERE** for any of us in a world like this? A world where sin and the devil team up against us? A world where our own flesh – our sinful, rebel side – a world where our own flesh works with the devil against us? Works with the power of sin, becoming its willing accomplice against us?

When the politicians and the generals and the second lieutenants tell a soldier to kill in an unjust war, when they tell him that it's justified, tell him that it's his patriotic duty, tell him it's what God wants . . . who's doing the talking? Isn't it the father of falsehood? Isn't it the devil, exercising his tyranny over us? And isn't he remaking the world in his own image and trying to get us to go along with it?

And what about the smaller scale? When a proud voice inside my head tells me to bring a rival down a notch, who's doing the talking? It's not the Holy Spirit, that's for sure. And it's not the good side of my nature. No. It's the devil. It's the power of sin. It's my own evil desire.

**BUT OVER AGAINST ALL THIS**, over against the falsehoods, over against the spin, over against the lies, there is the truth. And the truth is Jesus Christ. And he sets us free. Sets us free from the tyranny of the devil. Sets us free from following the father of falsehood. Sets us free from listening to lies, no matter who's telling them!

In a world like this, in a world of lies and deceptions, it's a comfort to be loved and embraced by the truth. It's a comfort to belong to the truth. Not that we don't get caught up in falsehoods. But body and soul, in life and in death – in other words, completely and in the most enduring way – we belong to Jesus Christ, who is the truth from God that sets us free.

And so, Mikhail, you were baptized into the truth today. The truth about God, that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The truth about yourself, that you are a sinner who needs to be set free by the mercy of God. The truth about the world, that it's a dangerous place with lurking enemies who would tear down what God is building, including you. And the truth about God's new people. Because you have been baptized into the church of Jesus Christ. The church is, despite all its failures and flaws, despite its checkered past and its beleaguered present – the church is the pillar and bulwark of the truth (cf. 1 Timothy 3:15). And the church is your home. We are your home.

**AND FOR YOU, MIKHAIL,** and for all of us, the freedom we have in Christ is a freedom to be claimed every day. It's not only once that the devil and the power of sin held us captive. No, they continue to press their attacks, day after day. And there's a part of each of us that still cooperates with them.

But even in the face of all that, there is comfort. Because the Lord sends the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, to us. By the Holy Spirit, we are assured of life, when the devil wants to scare us to death. By the Holy Spirit, we are willing and ready to live for Christ, when our flesh would, on its own, only resist.

**THERE WAS ANOTHER EARTHQUAKE** in Turkey last week. Always so tragic. Imagine being trapped under the rubble. Your life is ebbing away. You're desperate to be freed from the suffocating weight. What a comfort it would be to know that help is on the way! What a comfort it would be to know that you will be rescued! What a comfort it would be to know that no matter how deep the rubble, no matter how many days go by, you will survive, you will be rescued, you will live. And you won't be alone.

That's the comfort we have in the gospel. It's not fresh fruit, soft towels, and warm blankets. It's not chocolate mints. No. It's real comfort. Comfort for the real danger we face from real enemies, sworn enemies. Comfort for the long haul, for life and death, for body and soul.