

You Shall Strike His Heel (rev.1)

3rd Sunday after Pentecost B - June 9, 2024

Or, as the Geneva Bible (1560) has it, “Thou shalt bruise his heel.” The translators, keen to at least placate if not please Elizabeth, their ‘most vertuous and noble queen’, helpfully add, by way of a footnote: “Satan shall strike Christ and his members, but not overcome them” (Gen.3:8 note q). God’s curse to serpent-kind writ new as God’s curse to Satan-kind. For Christ, like all people, descended from Eve, as Satan did not. Enmity between Satan and the children of Eve would go on ever after. Each would strike their blow, and be struck in turn: people and snakes, the Father of Lies and the children of Eve, the Tempter and those so easily tempted, the Victimizer and his victims.

The first of whom was she, our universal mother, as the tale has come down to us of universal woe. Hear the lament given in the voice of Adam by the 17th century English poet and theologian John Milton in his great epic, *Paradise Lost*:

O Eve, in evil hour thou didst give ear
To that false Worm, of whomsoever taught
To counterfeit Mans voice, true in our Fall,
False in our promis’d Rising; since our Eyes
Op’n’d we find indeed, and find we know
Both Good and Evil, Good lost, and Evil got,
bad Fruit of Knowledge, if this be to know... (*PL IX:1067-1073*)

Good lost, and Evil got, indeed. And that’s not all: the beguiled were held as guilty as the Beguiler, each with their own punishment and shame. So great was the power imagined in the Beguiler, and so wounding the fruits of that beguiling, that the learned people of Jesus’s time could only imagine Satan or his minions at work in the raw and unleashed power of Jesus, healing the sick and casting out demons right and

left. ““He has Beelzebub, and by the ruler of demons he casts out demons,”” the scribes say – that is, those who record people’s deeds and interpret the law. As far as they could tell, only Evil could have that much power in the world, things being as they are. Why it would do this they could not fathom, as Jesus pointed out when explaining his point about a House Divided. They could not imagine what he was actually showing them: how Evil is defeated now by overwhelming Good, and how after the Cross and Empty Tomb, it would be defeated for good. So do not be afraid of the curses in Genesis 3, O people of God, he said. They won’t last forever.

That would be news to those who wrote Genesis 3, not to mention Genesis 2 and 4, which tell one mythic version of the story of how humankind came to be, and came to be as it is. It is not a pretty story, and it does not have a happy ending. So unhappy is its ending, and so hard its implications, that future generations way back when had to craft a whole chapter, in verse, by way of answer to it: Genesis 1. In that hymn to and of creation, God makes all things good. That’s not the case in Genesis 2-4. In Genesis 1, though, humankind are made in the image of God, and are made good. Thus, humankind have perfection to fall from, and fall we did. But what goes down might go up, which is how Christians came to see it. Otherwise, our fate was too terrible to imagine: we have lost paradise, and we can never get in back. All that is left to us are the curses in Genesis 3: toil for bread, lust in relations, pain in childbirth, and snakes that bite back even when bruised. All because we wanted to know, wanted to be like God, even though we already were.

There are stupid readings of these chapters in which evil is held to come from women. We need pay no heed to such readings; they are simply wrong. Wiser readings note that evil comes from people’s choices, since only we can choose between the evil and the good. It’s not God’s fault, in other words, even if God gave us the ability to mess up and keep on messing. In order for Cain, the first-fruits of the fallen union between Adam and Eve, to be able to choose evil on purpose, he

and his parents had to know what it is. They find out, and regret it for the rest of their lives. But they never forget it, and never act as though they tried to. Knowing it cost them Paradise, and replaced it with toil and misery. Knowledge can be like that. Cain knew well that toil and misery, but thought he'd at least be praised for toiling well. He was not. God preferred his brother's sacrifice – lambs – to his: grain. So Cain killed his brother in a jealous rage and then lied about it to God. God saw and heard, and it was not good. Cain was cursed for it forever, yet the whole event shows humankind set loose, and getting worse. God had to intervene several times before people got any better, and even then it was painful for all involved. Any triumph was provisional, any happiness fleeting.

'He shall strike your head, but you shall strike his heel' is a pretty good summation of human history understood as the struggle between good and evil, truth and lies, the beguiled and what beguiles them. How else could we understand it? The good life, for those who get it, has the intricacy and delicacy of spun sugar. Lives of misery, by contrast, are as solid and lasting as bedrock, and as hard to change.

Yet at least, in Genesis 2-4, life ends when it's over. But what if it didn't? That, as Milton has Adam lament, would be even worse. Here's how Adam realizes this after his fall into sin, while he's sounding the depths of that fall:

...But say / That Death be not one stroak, as I suppos'd,
Bereaving sense, but endless miserie
From this day onward, which I feel begun
Both in me, and without me, and so last
To Perpetuitie....Ah, why should all mankind
For one mans fault thus guiltless be condemn'd,
If guiltless? But from me what can proceed,
But all corrupt, both Mind and Will deprav'd... (*PL* X808-816, 821-825)

That is: all are guilty of any evil they might do, and are condemned for it. Imagine Adam's state of mind as he realized this. What I have done – what we have done –

is so bad that no-one can ever be good again, and we can never be set free, unless God wills and makes it, somehow, so. Somehow God will make it so, he eventually is given to understand. That means that human life will not be pointless, brutal, and to no purpose. Our suffering will have meaning, and an end. Yet that end may be a long time coming. Any happiness, fulfillment, flourishing, and release we find along the way will only last so long.

Thus does Milton remind us that the writers of Genesis 2-4 could not imagine a way out of the toil and misery they saw at the heart of the human condition. The only reason they could give for that condition is in was that we did it to ourselves. We made ourselves the way we are – or our ancestors did, and then made us. Neither of these things can we undo. We can end our lives, that is, but we cannot un-begin them. They saw that we had made ourselves miserable and full of toil in response to what God made and allowed us, even primed us, to do. We didn't have to, but we did. We can't get away from that, they realized, not while life's breath lasts. 'It is what it is' they might well have glossed their own writings. They never imagined when they wrote this myth that others would find it to prefigure the struggle between our Enemy and our Redeemer – a struggle that the Redeemer would eventually win.

Milton, Paul, the gospel writers, and those who wrote the footnotes to the Geneva Bible thrilled to that victory. It was all they knew on earth, and all they needed to know. It came as a momentous solution to the problem the human condition posed for itself the moment the first people became self-critical and self-aware. However, it comes with the added bonus, or risk, of realizing that death is not the end. The solution to the problem of the condition our condition was in required that God do something dramatic to change who and how we are. It also required that we realize that what comes after life ends will be either far worse or far better than the life that came before. The good news is that we can choose. The bad news is that we have to

choose. The one who raised Christ will raise us, Paul writes, if we let God do it. Yet, but as Mark has Jesus say, there is a sin one can commit that even God cannot forgive.

Actually, according to other rabbis of Jesus's time, there were more than one. Making sacred things profane, lying about what the law required, publicly shaming someone, and 'voiding the covenant of Abraham' were among them. These were things Jesus was often accused of doing, which gives some indication of how scared some folk were of what his life and ministry actually meant. Another sin for which one could not be forgiven was the one Jesus noted today: blaspheming the Holy Spirit, who people of the time called the Lord of the Spirits. Upon this form or manner of God were hung the deeds of the righteous, and his light shone upon them, holy and chosen to dwell with him in this life and the next. Denying the Lord of the Spirits – that is, saying there wasn't one, or returning him his ticket to eternity – would get you cast out of the dwelling-place of the righteous, and no-one would be able to get you back in.¹

“All corrupt, both Mind and Will depraved.” That's Milton's Adam, again, but it is also why Jesus casts his family aside in this passage from Mark. He never interacts with them again, by the way, except to tell his mother, at the foot of the cross, that the disciple he loved will now take his place as her son. Apocalyptic religious figures often do that, particularly when the End Times they predict have Good triumph over Evil by force. No-one in such times has time for anyone except their new family of the chosen, holy, and redeemed. That is what Jesus calls those who are actually listening to him: his new family, those who do the will of God. No-one else means very much to him.

We may not like that very much, but that's the way it is. Jesus simply was not a family man. Unlike the first man and woman...but look what happened to them.

¹ Information in this paragraph is taken from *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* Mark 3:28-30 fn (p. 67), and 1 Enoch 38.

And the will of God? As Milton has the archangel Michael explain to Adam, human toil and misery are not the end. Christ will come, he says, and heal the wounds people did to themselves once they realized they could, “not by destroying Satan, but his works in thee and in thy Seed” (*PL XII:394-5*). Blood will be needful, and nails, a crown of thorns, and seven words choked out – all to save you and yours, Adam. In a word, “The Law of God exact he shall fulfill / Both by obedience and by love, though love / Alone fulfill the Law” (*ibid.*, 402-4a). Christ will to the hard part so that we can do the good part, live the good life doing no ill to our neighbors, loving the God who made all things good, and caring for them as best we can, in order “that grace...may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God” (2 Cor. 4:15). That’s the point: that we may live free and well.

That is: Good got, and Evil lost, if we so choose. Why is it so hard for people so to choose? Because we made it that way, or are made that way, or both. But choose good anyway, and live lives of love. Otherwise, as the first people realized the moment they’d made the wrong choice, there’s no point to living at all. Except maybe to strike the Devil’s head now and then, as occasion serves, since “the will

And high permission of all-ruling Heaven
Left him at large to his own dark designs,
That with reiterated crimes he might
Heap on himself damnation, while he sought
Evil to others, and enrag’d might see
How all his malice serv’d but to bring forth
Infinite goodness... (*PL I:212-218*)

There are days, I’ll admit, when *Schadenfreude* on so eternal a scale feels like (almost) enough. So even if he still should strike our heel, O People of God, let us do good and choose love, always. Always. *Amen*.