

Special Feature:

Sermon by Frank Hiddemann

In Neudietendorf Moravian Church, Germany

Translated by Linda Easter

Text: Ephesians 2:1-10

Dear brothers and sisters,

Children of wrath and a ruler of air, of death, of desire, of flesh appear in our Scripture text. And then also God's grace.

The dark, stormy sky opens and releases a pyramid of light. I blink my eyes.

Even the sentences we have heard seem to have been brought into disarray by the mythological storm.

Once well ordered, they have been tossed about by a wind blowing through them.

Did the Ruler of the kingdom in the air blow so mightily?

Or did the author of these lines, hair blowing in the wind, formulate his sentences in the face of this wind?

A small cosmology — brought to paper by summer storms or autumn weather that struck earlier.

“Children of wrath.”

I get stuck at this phrase. I asked a 12-year old boy what “children of wrath” means. Boys of this age are natural experts in this subject. The war between Good and Evil rages in their games, their books, their movies. What are “children of wrath”?

My son answered after careful thought: they are “dark warriors of a subterranean Ruler” I repeat the words: “...dark warriors of a subterranean ruler.” And it must have sounded so perplexing that my son added:

“Like the Orcs.”

Now, I know: Orcs. They are figures in the fantasy epic of J.R. Tolkien, a Catholic. In the past few years, the movie version has made the book more popular than ever. There are elves and dwarves, hobbits and humans, wizards and Orcs in Lord of the Rings. The Orcs are the evil soldiers of the Lord of Darkness. They resemble trolls or animals and are predatory and violent.

“All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.” (v. 3, NRSV)

That fits. “We were Orcs,” I figured out.

“Are Orcs human?” countered my son.

Difficult question.

In Lord of the Rings, they are counterparts to the elves. Orcs are the evil ones who can choose no good.

The others are the good ones who can choose no evil. And yet, I dig in my memory, the Orcs once were human. But they remained with their evil choices.

“The Orcs chose Evil,” I say.

“And could they have chosen Good?” asks my son.

“Yes, they could have,” I answered, “but it becomes harder all the time. Once you have chosen Evil it becomes easier to choose Evil again.”

The boy looks at me skeptically.

“Imagine,” I attempt to explain, “that you have plowed a piece of your neighbor’s land and claim it as yours. Then you have to lie to defend yourself, and it becomes harder all the time to tell the truth. It is easier to take another piece of the land. It is easier to claim it all belongs to you anyhow than to unravel everything and tell the truth. You get into a sort of downward spiral with the first evil deed. It becomes more difficult each time to turn back completely. Things go downhill more steeply all the time.

I am a bit unsure about my explanation, using this farm example that really is not part of the boy’s frame of reference. But he accepts the words and trots off to another object of interest. Perhaps he needs to think about it to find a new objection. Perhaps the issue is clear to him for now.

I return to my text. It is difficult to return to Good once one has chosen Evil.

It’s amazing how the conversation about the “children of wrath” brings us to the problem of good and evil and whether and how one can choose either.

And just as in Lord of the Rings, a dark angel also appears in our text. One who sees to it that we cannot revise our evil choices.

And then the light angel, Jesus Christ.

He is not just the opponent of the dark angel.

He is not there to motivate us to make good decisions. He does not have the same function as the dark angel. He is not the light version of the dark one.

He lived a life on earth.

He had the choice between Good and Evil.

He fought against the downward spiral.

As a human, he tried to live amidst the difficulties of life.

His life was a view of God.

It ended at the cross and in death.

But God resurrected him.

He lives.

And we no longer live in the downward spiral of evil deeds. His life is credited to us. And that it is not logical.

Why should his life improve ours, make us righteous, spare us the choosing of sides?

The dark angel tries to lead us astray.

The light angel lived under the conditions of our humanity.

It is grace, our text makes sure to emphasize. And this grace is like a new creation.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” (v. 8-10)

What does this grace feel like?

The first answer comes clearly and easily. We no longer have to try constantly to behave correctly, to choose Good and not Evil. There is good and evil in our lives also, but our life is not dependent on these decisions —Whether we succeed or fail,

Whether the decisions can be added up to a positive total. That no longer needs to be our striving. We are credited with the grace that Christ Jesus earned.

This grace is an event. Like the act of creation. Just as God separated the heavens from the earth. Just as he called the light into being.

That is how he calls us into a life that no longer is under the stress of having to be right.

“For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to our way of life.”

As we are told in this passage of the letter to the Ephesians, God has created us anew in Christ. And yet God created us to do good works. Yes, he created them in advance. It is not irrelevant how we live. We have the freedom to choose.

And yet something is expected of us. If our life is a success — that no longer depends on our good works. But if we are to be new creations in Christ, does not that depend on our good works for which we have been newly created? Our text speaks so strongly of this grace that is not of our own earning.

What does this grace feel like?

The second part is more difficult to express than the first. Our life no longer depends on whether we do everything right. And yet we must do good works to be in Christ.

Quickly the cycle begins again.

We no longer try in panic to do good to save our lives; rather we try to do good to remain in Christ. that brings us again and again to a new awareness. If we take the message of this Sunday seriously, Christians have another chance to begin anew.

They don't have to go back to the very beginning; they just have to go back to Christ — where that which angers us about ourselves suddenly becomes very small. His life was right, his life was approved by God.

And that is where we can begin anew. As new creations, as the beneficiaries of his gain.

The evil angel has no more power because we no longer fall into nothingness, but rather into the hands of God who creates us anew just as he promised us. We are the firstborn of the new creation every time we surrender ourselves and have to start anew.

And the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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