***Sermon Text for November 10, 2013***

by Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

“The evil one”

What a wonderful week off I had, a great opportunity to just stay at home and get things done that hadn’t been able to do up to now. One of those things was insulate between pipes for a floor that I put in. They have this wonderful spray insulation that would be perfect. I sprayed it and it worked, except there was this one place where there was a huge hole and I thought if I just spray more and more of this stuff it will accumulate and stay together and insulate the whole space. Well, I tried that, and it stayed for a while until the whole thing began to come down and so I used my hand to push it up. Big mistake, it was like tar. For that entire week my hand was completely black. I used gasoline, bought a special orange soap, it stayed with me and I couldn’t get rid of it. It literally took a week. Good thing I had off.

There are certain things that our entire life we are looking to cast off and put behind us. Even Jesus says get behind me Satan in order to cast off the evil one from Peter. The evil one, whenever I say that you know exactly who I mean. As the church lady says: Satan.

Where does our image and our understanding of the devil come from? You may or may not know this, but our modern understanding of the devil comes from a 17th century author called Jonathan Milton. Milton is the one who brought hell and Satan to the forefront of our minds. Before the 1600’s and his description in his book there wasn’t a clear definition of who Satan was. He gave us a host of demons, and the fiery burning place, and an underworld. Even though it is not necessarily biblical, today when we think of “the evil one” we feel comfortable with the image of the devil in a very hot place looking for an opportunity to catch one of us in the act of sinning so that he can claim us.

In the Scripture today we are still listening in on Jesus’ prayer to his Father. He first told his disciples to take courage for he had conquered the world, he then asked God for glory, then last week we missed hearing ask God to protect us so that we would all be one under Christ. Today we hear in the prayer from whom we need to be protected. Jesus asks God to protect us from “the evil one”. Who or what is this evil one that we need to look for and be protected from. Jesus tells us in these verses in John.

Throughout history we have seen different caricatures of the evil one. We have called him Satan, the devil, Beelzebub, even Lucifer. Did you know that Lucifer actually means the light bearer in latin, and is never found in the Bible, and because of a scribal error in the middle ages that name was associated with a fallen angel associated with Satan. We have seen the personification of the devil with horns and a trident. I remember when I was a kid growing up in New Jersey and there was an area folk tale about a creature called the Jersey Devil. The story went that he was born as an offspring of the devil and had wings and horns and prowled around the pine barrens in New Jersey. I shared a room with one of my older brothers and he was scared to death of this creature.

I used to climb onto the roof when he was asleep and go to the window right by his bed and make the sound of the Jersey Devil, I used to be really good at it, and I would scratch on his window. It isn’t often that a younger brother is able to strike fear into the hear of an older brother, but I did it successfully and often. There is something about the devil or Satan that really scares us, from Rosemary’s baby to the various movies and books about someone selling their soul to the devil we do have an awareness of the evil one.

In our first reading in the Old Testament today we see one of the three places in the Old Testament where Satan is mentioned. Only 3 times is Satan mentioned in the Old Testament compared to a myriad of times in the New Testament. Did you get the role that Satan plays here in Job. He was in the court of God, basically one of God’s helpers who had a specific role. His role was that of the accuser, the one whose duty it was to find fault in people and bring a report back to God. He is not considered evil or king of the underworld at all in the Old Testament. In fact the Hebrew word Satan means accuser, the one who finds fault. That is what he does with Job, he is given the job of finding fault or accusing Job of his sin, which he never ends up finding.

John Milton in Paradise Lost has Satan enter into the body of the snake that we find in Genesis 3. But that never happens in Scripture. The snake in Genesis is merely described as a crafty animal. Nowhere in Scripture do we read that Satan had anything to do with the first Sin. Satan in the Old Testament is not necessarily considered the evil one but rather the one who challenges us, moves us to defend and refine our actions and beliefs.

One of the dangers that we have in this modern world is the removing of blame and responsibility from the people who are directly involved. A teen is involved in a shooting then it is the parent’s fault. One of our kids in Italy had a horrible life. Abused as a child and really never got into the flow of society even as an adult. Finally he was arrested for shooting a policeman. I managed to convince the judge that I would be responsible for him if he would give him another chance. The judge agreed and we sent him to Portugal to work at a center where I knew some people. For a while we thought that things were going to get straightened out in his life and then we received the phone call we were all dreading. They were sending him back to us because things were missing and he was basically impossible to handle. As he stepped off the plane I asked him what happened and his response was: “Well it wasn’t my fault, you should have known that I couldn’t live in a foreign country.” His response was that he was not able to be a productive member of society because we had set him up in an unfavorable working condition. Basically it was our fault.

The devil has been blamed for more natural disasters, bad decisions, and tragedies than any other person except maybe God. How many times have you heard people say “The devil made me do it” when in reality they are saying: I don’t want to take responsibility for my actions so the evil one sounds like a great person to blame. It certainly wasn’t my fault. In the New Testament we see the person of Satan changing from a being in God’s court to as Jesus states in Luke a fallen angel whose purpose it is to antagonize and separate humanity from God. It is in the New Testament that we get the wording of the evil one.

In the New Testament we see that all sicknesses, all natural calamities, anything evil and not of God was due to Satan. Demon possession was believed to be the cause of epilepsy and other medical ailments that today we can put a name on. You remember Jesus how he used to go around driving demons out of peoples’ bodies. One time the demons after they had been driven out by Jesus went into a herd of swine.

Satan, though, the evil one was considered in Jesus’ time as the ruler of the world, the one who had the power over the people’s lives. This is why we hear Jesus praying for protection for us, his disciples. Jesus doesn’t ask the Father to take these disciples out of the world, but to protect them from the evil one. In Matthew when Jesus teaches us the Lord’s prayer he taught it like this: …deliver us from the evil one. This is the original Greek that over time has been changed. Throughout the New Testament we find Jesus, praying to God that we would be protected from the evil one, from Satan.

I would like to suggest three possible ways that we can seek God’s protection from the evil one. One of the ways that we can seek God’s protection is to join a religious community and take ourselves out of the world. Bob Jones did that in Georgetown Guyana, David Koresh did it in Waco, Texas. There are a myriad of cultish groups today that feel that their responsibility is to hold onto the true religion and to completely separate themselves from the world. They do this by cutting all ties from family, friends, society. This is not God’s calling for us. In fact Jesus prays to the Father in verse 15: “I am not asking you to take them out of the world.” Jesus doesn’t want us to remove ourselves completely from the world, much less pretend that we are the only ones protected by God and any interference from the outside world might jeopardize God’s protection.

A second approach is what I call the Puritan approach. I remember while I was in college I spent a semester in Rome in a convent studying. During my time there I noticed that within that walled community the nuns lived not very different from us except for the scheduled prayer times. They had their own farm lands, it was the first time that I saw a nun in a habit riding a tractor. While I was there one of the nuns who had been cloistered for 63 years passed away. Can you imagine being cloistered for 63 years, she was 97 when she died. But this is the calling for some but I do not see too many here who might fall into the category of having the call to the sister or brotherhood. St. Teresa, a well known spiritualist, encouraged the sisters under her care: “Don’t coop up your soul in a corner.

But we have chosen to live a different style of life, take a different approach to our life under God’s protection. We may be simple and chop our own wood, but not because of some theological reason, it is just more practical. We are not at the point of being so separate from the world.

We need to go back to the prayer which Christ prays on our behalf here in John. We are protected. Christ asked God to protect us from the evil one. We are protected. We don’t need to separate ourselves from the world. We can life freely in the world using our gifts and talents that God has entrusted to us. We are called as one theologian stated to be men and women bustling, stirring, organizing, speaking, and whatever else with the dust and the fire of the world on our clothes, but carrying our Savior with us everywhere. We need to live in this world as if we have a protective hedge around us. How can we do this? Well because the Bible tells us so. The gospel of John tells us that Jesus prayed to the Father that we would be protected, and I believe that we are protected.

Do I believe in Satan? Yes. Do I believe in the presence and the power of the evil one? Yes. Do I believe that we need to live on the defensive always looking for ways to shirk responsibility and afraid that we are not protected. NO. We are protected and we can live under that protection in confidence.

If we choose to step away from God’s protection, then we will be in danger of falling prey to Satan, the accuser. In this prayer Jesus uses the example of Judas as the one who was “lost” to the evil one. Jesus had set up a barrier of defense around his disciples but Judas chose to step outside of that barrier and the end result was that Judas was lost.

Brothers and sisters in this prayer today we hear Jesus praying for our protection against the evil one, the one who seduces us away from God. Stay within the fold, these walls of protection that Jesus has built around us and let us live within this world using all of the gifts that God has given us. Amen.