

I saw a meme last week that talked about an encounter with the devil. It said,
*The devil whispered in my ear, "You're not strong enough to weather the storm."
 I whispered in the devil's ear, "At least I didn't lose a fiddle contest to some hillbilly
 from Georgia."*

Okay. That old Charlie Daniel's song, "The Devil Went Down to Georgia" is pure fiction. But the theme of the song has been around in Western culture for 500 years. It goes back to old stories of *Faust* or *Doctor Faustus*, who sells his soul to the devil in order to gain human knowledge.

That theme has been updated over the years. The classic short story, *The Devil and Daniel Webster*, or legends about the great bluesman, Robert Johnson, both from the 1930's. The 1950's Broadway musical, *Damn Yankees*. "The Devil Went Down to Georgia" in the 1970's. The movie, *Crossroads* in the 1980's. In these various versions, sometimes the Devil wins, and sometimes the hero succeeds in beating the Devil.

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During Lent we've been reading through the Gospel of John on both Sunday mornings and as part of our Parish Reading Project. But Lent began with a Gospel lesson from Matthew. We read about Jesus being tempted by Satan in the wilderness. In 3 of the Gospels, Satan appears fairly frequently. I used my Bible software to do a quick number crunch, to count the number of verses that mention "Satan," or "The devil" or "Demon(s)."

Matthew—17 verses.

Mark—15 verses.

Luke—30 verses.

And John—only 3 verses. There's 1 occurrence of "Satan"¹ and 2 occurrences of "the devil."² And the word "Demons" is never mentioned in John. In John, unlike Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we never hear of Jesus doing an exorcism, Jesus casting out demons.

Does that mean that John doesn't think that Jesus is fighting against spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God? Not hardly. But John usually frames it in a different way.

John rarely talks about the devil. But John does talk in even more cosmic terms, more universal terms. John talks about Jesus in terms of light versus darkness, and of life versus death.

In John "darkness" appears 7x; "light" appears 22x.

In John "death" appears 13x; "life" appears 47x.

¹ John 13:27

² John 8:44, 13:2

Jesus as light and life are big themes in John.

In his prologue, John says right up front, "In him was light, and the light was the life of all people."³ And then he follows it immediately with the statement, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it (or overpower it)."⁴

And these themes crop up in Jesus' famous "I am" statements in John.

More precisely they are, "I am the... (fill in the blank)" statements. And then Jesus fills in the blank with a particular title or attribute. And these attributes describe his essence, his character, who he is.

There are basically 7 of these "I am the..." statements. A couple of them get repeated, but there are basically 7 unique statements. We've run into most of them in our readings so far in our Parish Reading Project. And you can break them down into several clusters.

A couple of these "I am" statements center on the relationship between Jesus and us.

"I am the Good Shepherd."⁵ And Jesus goes on to say that we are his sheep, and he cares for his sheep, he cares for us. And he even will lay down his life for his sheep.

"I am the vine."⁶ And he says that we are the branches. And that branches only bear fruit when they stay attached, when they stay in relationship with the vine.

A couple other "I am the..." statements talk about how Jesus is the way we enter into a relationship with God.

"I am the gate."⁷ In other words, Jesus is the way we enter God's kingdom, God's sheepfold.

Or the statement we often read at funerals: "I am the way, the truth, and the life."⁸ Again, Jesus is the way we enter his Father's house.

But this verse is a compound "I am" statement. Not only is Jesus the way, as well as the truth. He is also the life. So this makes this one of 4 basic "I am" statements that talk about Jesus being light and life.

³ John 1:4

⁴ John 1:5

⁵ John 10:11, 14

⁶ John 15:1, 5

⁷ John 10:7, 9

⁸ John 14:6

In one statement, Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."⁹

And in chapter 6, Jesus teaches extensively about what we will later call communion or the eucharist. Jesus talks about himself as bread:

"I am the bread of life," he says, "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."¹⁰

And a few verses later he returns to that same image:

"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."¹¹

Jesus is bread of life and living bread. Jesus is the source of life to all who believe and trust in him. And, as he says over and over in chapter 6, he will raise these believers up on the last day.¹²

Which brings us to our Gospel lesson today. It's another long lesson. But at the heart of it is one of the greatest of the "I am" statements.

Jesus' dear friend Lazarus is dying. Jesus delays travelling to see him. He doesn't start travelling until his friend is already dead. And when Jesus arrives, Lazarus's sister Martha lets him have it with both barrels:

"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."¹³

She's basically saying, 'Lord, where the hell were you? You could have stopped this, but you didn't.'

That's a tough accusation. In the midst of a global pandemic, I suspect that Martha speaks for many people in our world today. "Lord, why aren't you stopping this?" That's a legitimate spiritual question

But Martha also follows up this question with a statement of faith.

"But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

Listen to the subtext of what she's saying: 'Lord, I'm mad. I'm angry. But I still trust you.'

And it is to Martha that Jesus makes the strongest of the "I am" statements.

⁹ John 8:12, with partial repeat in 9:5

¹⁰ John 6:35

¹¹ John 6:51

¹² John 6:39, 40, 44, 54

¹³ John 11:22

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."¹⁴ And then he adds, "Do you believe this?"¹⁵

And that's a tough question as well. But it's so important. Jesus asks, "Do you believe this?" 'When push comes to shove, to you believe that I am the source of life? Do you really trust that everyone who believes in me, even if they experience death in this world, will still have life? Eternal life? That they will never truly die?'

That's a tough question Jesus asks. And yet Martha gives an amazing answer: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah (the Christ), the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

Jesus won't raise her brother and call him out of the tomb until 17 verses later. And yet Martha already responds with faith. 'Yes Lord, I believe you are who you say you are.'

The devil whispered in my ear, "You're not strong enough to weather the storm."

We are in the midst of a global storm, a global pandemic. Are we strong enough to weather it? We are face to face with anxiety and fear and disease and death.

The devil whispered in my ear, "You're not strong enough to weather the storm."

Well, I guarantee you that the solution to weathering that storm is NOT found in a fictitious fiddle-playing hillbilly from Georgia.

The only solution is to do what Martha did. In her extreme grief and anger she comes before Jesus honestly. She lays all her cards on the table. 'Lord, why weren't you here? Why didn't you stop this?'

And yet she also responds in trust. 'Lord, I believe that you are who you say you are.'

If and when the devil whispers in your ear, remember who Jesus is, and put your trust in him.

He is the Good Shepherd who loves you and who goes to the cross to die for you and bring you life.

He is light in the midst of darkness. He is life in the midst of death. He says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live... Do you believe this?"

Do you believe this?

¹⁴ John 11:25-26

¹⁵ John 11:26