

When I was in seminary, my preaching professor said something to my preaching class I’ve never forgotten. In an offhand remark, he said, “The devil had no interest in any of you until you applied to seminary.” It took some time, for me, to fully understand what that meant.

It’s the idea that the devil will ignore you and let you do your own thing, but the moment you make a decision to serve God, as soon as you resolve to better yourself, as soon as you try to accomplish something to further God’s purposes, that’s when you become the Devil’s personal project. That’s when he shows up and devises crafty ways to block our progress and derail our plans.

It happened to Jesus. When Jesus was 30-years-old, and just about to begin his ministry, that was when the devil showed up and cleverly tempted him to veer from his mission. When Jesus announced to the disciples he must go to Jerusalem, be crucified, and in three days rise from the dead, Peter, said, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” Do you remember how Jesus responded? He said, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me...”

I put on some weight over the winter and I’ve been trying to cut back on sweets. The other night, I had dinner at the Ship’s Cellar Pub with a friend. I was pretty full and was not planning to get dessert. However, my friend ordered the carrot cake. Before I could say, “No dessert for me” the woman on the other side of me, whom I did not know, said, “You have to have the blueberry pie.” She said, “It’s the best I’ve had.”

That’s all it took. I caved and ordered the pie. But it didn’t end there. Then, the server asked, “Do you want it a la mode? To which the woman next to me said, “You have to get it a la mode.” I almost turned to her and asked, “Who sent you to torment me? Get behind me, Satan!” Of course, I caved again and got the ice cream.

Whether you literally believe there’s a devil, who tries to thwart our good intentions or not, the point is that when we set out to do good, we can expect opposition. Therefore, a big part of following Jesus is persevering when opposition comes. Sometimes faith requires endurance and effort. Today’s Gospel reading indicates there’s a reward in persevering in the face of opposition.

Jesus gathered the disciples in order to send them out on a mission. He instructed them to go to the surrounding cities and towns and proclaim the good news: “The Kingdom of heaven has come near.” Right there, that would put them at odds with the Roman Empire and those religious authorities who colluded with Rome.

This mission assumes that the Roman Imperial world was not as God wanted it. The Roman Empire ruled by way of violence, coercion, and death. The disciples were to enact God’s alternative, which is a liberating and merciful empire. Therefore, they were to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. God’s alternative kingdom would be marked by mercy, healing, and restoration.

In addition, whereas the Roman Empire ruled by forcing the allegiance of people with threats of violence and death...nailing people to crosses, God’s alternative operated by invitation. If anyone did not welcome them or listen to their message, they were to shake off the dust from their feet and move on. No one was to be forced to convert to Christianity. God’s alternative kingdom would not operate by violence or coercion, but by invitation.

As the followers of Jesus enacted God’s alternative kingdom, in which peace came about through justice rather than violence, where God ruled rather than Caesar, and where love triumphed over fear, they would find themselves at odds with Rome. The Empire would strike back.

I titled this sermon “The Empire Strikes Back” hoping it would conjure the image of the “Star Wars” sequel of the same name. The story goes that the Galactic Empire ruled through fear, intimidation, and tyranny. At the end of “Star Wars” the empire’s planet-eating death Star was destroyed. In the epic battle between good and evil, the good asserted itself, but the Empire would not relinquish power easily. The Empire always strikes back.

As soon as the disciples began to serve God, to further God’s purposes, they would meet opposition. The Roman Empire would respond. Jesus said, “They will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me.”

Some might give up. Some might back down. Some might cave at the slightest opposition. Jesus said, "But the one who endures to the end will be saved." There's a reward for persevering in the face of opposition.

Years ago, a woman started coming to the church I was serving. She was new to church. She told me, "I love coming to worship. I love being part of the community and exploring my faith, but my family is having a tough time with it. They complain that I'm not home on Sunday."

Have you ever tried to make a change, or do something good, or take a stand, and resistance came from the place you least expected? It can be really hard to persevere in the face of opposition, but Jesus offered his followers encouragement.

First, he impressed on them that enduring in the face of opposition is part of what it means to be his disciple. It's not really an option. Years ago, I received an email from a church member saying my sermon was too political. He said, "I come to worship to get away from politics." He said, "I just want to be comfortable when I come to church."

I understand that. I know he's not alone in that sentiment. However, if it's true that Jesus ushered in the kingdom of heaven as an alternative to the kingdoms of this world, then the Christian life is inherently political.

I believe every time I step behind this pulpit it's a political act, because I'm proclaiming the kingdom of heaven as opposed to earthly kingdoms. Therefore, I endure the occasional email on Sunday afternoon. Jesus tried to get his disciples to accept that as they demonstrated the values of the kingdom of God, opposition was inevitable. There was no way to avoid it.

Secondly, Jesus told his followers to not be intimidated by the opposition they face. Have you ever faced a problem and felt completely overwhelmed? You didn't know how in the world you were going to cope. Maybe you're feeling that way right now.

Jesus told the disciples, "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." It wasn't immediately clear to me what that meant. The best explanation I've heard came from the late preacher Peter Gomes.

Gomes described the serpent or the snake as the creature most aware of their environment, most sensitive to their surroundings, most in touch with their circumstances. Gomes wrote, "When Jesus speaks of the wisdom of the serpent... he wants us, like the serpent, always to know what is going on.

Gomes describes the dove as the symbol of the Spirit of God. Where the dove is, there is to be found serenity, reconciliation, and peace. Gomes concludes, that to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves means "to know what is going on AND not be overwhelmed by it." There's no force too powerful, no problem too big, not even death itself is any match for the power of God's love.

Therefore, Jesus told his followers to trust and rely on God. He said, "When [the Empire] hands you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the spirit of your Father speaking through you." That is to say God provides resources for enduring. God does not leave us to face our troubles alone.

This being the day before Juneteenth, the holiday marking the day when the last enslaved people in the United States learned they were free, I was thinking about the music of the Civil Rights movement and the role it played in helping folks endure when the Empire struck back: "We Shall Overcome," "We Shall Not Be Moved." "Lift Every Voice and Sing."

That's what the music, here at First Parish, does for me. Each week, it lifts my spirit. It connects me to the divine. It helps to keep me going. Music is a spiritual resource that helps us endure. That's why I celebrate our Music Ministry today.

The life of faith takes effort, because the moment we decide to follow Jesus, the Devil takes an interest in us.

As soon as we decide to do good or to better ourselves, the Devil snaps to attention.

As soon as we start to pray and worship and serve, the devil creates distractions.

As soon as you got onto a church committee, the Devil got busy.

As soon as we resolve to treat our bodies like a temple for the Holy Spirit, the Devil recommends the blueberry pie.

In this life we will meet opposition and adversity, but for those who endure to the end, great is the reward.

