

The Twilight Zone

September 23, 2012

John 3:19-21; 1 John 1:5-10

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If you were around at the dawn of television, you may remember the Rod Serling production "The Twilight Zone" that ran from 1959 to 1964 and was revived in the late 1980's. Obsessed with science fiction, Serling's episodes played on the imagined line between reality and fantasy; and his trademark was the surprise, usually bizarre, ending. Equally bizarre and ambiguous, biblical drama presents another twilight zone, the shadow line between the light of God and the darkness of evil. Although the shadow of evil falls on all of us, we still do not have a clear picture of the source or the nature of evil. We live in ambiguity. The mystery of evil is as unfathomable as the mystery of God.

The earliest images of the Old Testament attributed the presence of evil in the world to the shadow side of God. Because God was the source of everything, it seemed that God must also be the source of evil. All human tragedy—natural, personal, and political—was rooted in the will of God, who purposely utilized evil to correct behavior and to change the course of creation. Thus, in the story of the flood, the corruption of humankind leads to divine regret for having created the earth; and God causes the waters of chaos to swallow up the earth's evil inhabitants. In the epilogue of Job, the Satan comes before God with "the heavenly beings" or "sons of God." The challenge to Job's character leading to an attack on his person takes place under the permission of the God who rules the world. We get a clear picture that God is in some sense involved in the unjust suffering of Job. We might leap to the conclusion that this bizarre picture has no place in the modern world until we hear comments like Jerry Falwell's opinion that 9-11 was God's judgment on America: "I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America. I point the finger in their face and say 'you helped this happen.'"

The Babylonian Exile, nearly six centuries before the time of Christ, seems to have influenced the view of good and evil. After the encounter with Persian dualism, the Jews began to attribute evil to the demonic that stands over and against the goodness of God. By the time of Christ, the Satan had become the personification of evil, and the supernatural demonic had become the source of all evil in the world. John could write: "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all." However, the Apocalyptic world view which followed the Exile and continues today to fascinate readers of the *Left Behind* novels, pictures an eternal battle between good and evil, God and Satan, that must end with the total destruction of evil and, along with it, all of the material universe. The creation is painted in shades of black and white, darkness and light, evil and good; and the goodness of creation declared in Genesis seems to get lost in a lust for the destruction of the physical world and its less than righteous inhabitants.

The source of evil is ambiguous. Who shall we blame for what is wrong in the world? Following Freud, the medical field of psychiatry had little use for the religious concept of sin. Psychiatry did not defend all human behavior as good so much as to apply the rationale of cause and effect. It seemed that all human behavior is caused in some sense by earlier life experiences that might be attributed to parents, siblings, friends, or society in general. The word *sin*, because of its association with moralistic legalism and religious censorship, was lost from the secular vocabulary for a half-century; and it seemed that people were relieved of all responsibility for their own bad behavior. I recall a poem that was recited in a psychology of religion class:

At three I had feelings of ambivalence toward my brothers
and so it follows naturally, I poisoned all my lovers.
But now I have concluded, the lesson this has taught
Everything that's wrong with me is someone else's fault.

Psychiatrist Karl Menninger shocked his associates as well as the religious world in his 1973 book *Whatever Became of Sin?* Menninger challenged the standing rule in his field of work that it is not polite to talk about sin. According to Menninger, sin disappeared from the modern world assumed under illness and reasoned cause and effect, and the ban was expanded to include most secular speech. In 1953 President Eisenhower made his first proclamation of a national day of prayer in

which he borrowed language from Abraham Lincoln, "It is the duty of nations as of men to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon." An article in *Theology Today* observed that none of Eisenhower's subsequent calls to prayer and no president after Eisenhower ever used the S-word again. "Republicans referred to the problems of 'pride' and 'self-righteousness.' The Democrats referred to 'short-comings.' But none used the grand old sweeping concept of sin" (p. 15). Menninger saw a conspiracy of modern thought, especially in his own field, to dismiss evil as a reality in the modern world.

The Nazi hatred of Jews and attempted genocide was not fully exposed for two decades after World War II, but for most of the world it became the prime example of human sin and the presence of real evil in the world. Yet, there are groups who continue to deny either that it happened or that the Holocaust was bad. Every civilized government in the world has laws that prohibit murder, but homicide has a grey area that allows justification for killing under some circumstances, and we still practice the execution of people, government sponsored homicide, for capital crimes.

One of the clearest evidences of the reality of evil is our inability to draw a straight line to distinguish evil from good. We find ourselves living in a grey area, a twilight zone between the darkness and light. Anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear in this world is aware that this is a dangerous world, that evil is real; but we invariably want to assign evil to others and leave ourselves off the hook.

Sin is universal. The Old Testament often speaks in terms of a simple light and dark population comprised of the righteous and the unrighteous, people who keep the law and people who violate the law of life; but even God's people are indicted as sinners, and the Jewish nation supposedly favored by God is subject to defeat and exile caused by the bad behavior of God's People.

I recall from childhood a Sunday morning when my pastor asked a show of hands for everyone in the congregation who had ever told a lie or who had ever taken something that did not belong to them. After some coaxing from the pulpit and the slow emergence of timid hands from all over the congregation, the vote gradually became unanimous. Then the pastor declared, "I thought that I had been called to bring the Word of God to the righteous; today I find myself in a den of liars and thieves." The mass confession of the congregation then opened the door for a sermon on the grace of God and a call to compassion towards all sinners.

Even the Apostle Paul has to confess (Romans 7:21-24): "I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

Unfortunately, the reality of universal failure in the human family opens the door to a denial of the reality of evil. If everyone does it, is "it" really so bad? But the very fact that in the secular world we impose on one another laws to regulate behavior suggests that the reality of evil in the world that sometimes emerges in our own thinking and doing is a problem that deserves containment.

The nature of evil stands in contrast with the nature of God. We may not have a firm grip on the nature of evil. We may have differences of opinion about whether some behavior is good, bad, or neutral. But we tend to agree that God is good, and that by nature evil is opposition to the goodness of God.

Psychiatrist M. Scott Peck seems to have our scripture text in view in his book on human evil, *People of the Lie*. Peck cites a conversation with his son who happened to observe that *evil* is *live* spelled backwards. The psychiatrist noted that he could not improve on his eight-year-old's concept: "Evil is in opposition to life. It is that which opposes the life force (p. 42)." Peck finally comes down on the biblical theme that evil is opposition to the truth. In order to find wholeness in life, whether in our human relationships, our self-understanding, or our relationship with God, we must be truthful.

I suspect that the reason for light and darkness emerged in human experience as symbols of good and evil was the principle of revelation in the light and hiddenness in the darkness. One of the stories that was still circulating in seminary when I enrolled in 1961 was about the complaint that had come from the women's dormitory that some students were staying up far too late at night. The President

issued an order calling for all lights to be off at 11:00 PM in the women's dormitory. (It was interesting that no complaint was given and no curfew was imposed on the men's dormitory). Someone (the rumor attributed it to one of the women working in the presidential office) slipped a note on the president's desk quoting our passage from John in the King James Version: "men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil."

Evil lurks in darkness. Even in politics it seems that world leaders have learned that cover-up is not to be preferred to confession, a word to the wise for both Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton.

We live in a world under construction. God who created the universe is still in the process of creating. I have no claim on the final word about the nature of evil any more than I can claim to have God captured in my theology, but I believe that the presence of evil in this world is evidence that God is not finished. We can join in the prayer of Charles Wesley, "Finish, then, Thy new creation." We live in the twilight zone between the light and darkness. We see in a mirror dimly. We live toward the day when we will see as we are seen and know as we are known by our gracious Redeemer.