

In the Garden of Good and Evil

Grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ...

When I was a child I loved watching some of the old cartoons – whether it be Bugs Bunny – the Flintstones – or even some of the Old Tom and Jerry cartoons...

And one of the things that always made sense to me, even as a child, was when one of the characters in those cartoons had to make a decision... on one shoulder there appeared an angel – and on the other shoulder there appeared a devil... and I think it made sense to me because, even when I was a child, I could relate to there being an *inner struggle going on* whenever I had to make a big decision...

Was I going to listen to my mother and do my homework? – or would I tell her that I didn't have any and go out and play instead?...

Would I look over at my friend's paper during the test? – or would I try hard and hope for the best?...

It was always a battle between good and evil... and to be honest (many times I let the good side win) but there were also many times when I allowed the dark side to take over as well...

And as we get older we're told that the good voice that we hear speaking to us is called our conscience...it's what the Greeks referred to as 'Sophia' (or wisdom)... and the Bible tells us that a wise person always listens to her voice (and then follows her advice) so that he or she might find blessing in this life time and in the world to come...

But the funny thing about life is that the inner struggle doesn't end with childhood (and it certainly doesn't end when you start believing in Christ either)... in fact, I remember reading a story about a man from the 18th Century – named James Boswell – who loved going to church... and according to a book he wrote, titled, 'London Diary', he didn't go to church for his wife or for his children – but because he truly loved connecting with God and he found peace whenever he went...

But what's strange about this man's story (and always reminds me of St. Augustine's book titled 'The Confessions') is that at the same time that he was worshiping God (he was also planning in his mind how he would pick up a prostitute later that evening in the streets of London)...

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And I love what he writes... he says this, “*Although I don’t view myself as being a unique human being – I will say that I lived a conflicted existence*”...

And the reason why I love that quote is because I think his words hold true for all of us... all of us are at times are conflicted – will we serve God? Or will we serve ourselves?... this is why even Martin Luther once mentioned that every human being is both ‘saint and sinner’ at the same time...

Friends, that’s what’s going on in our Gospel lesson this morning with King Herod...

Now, I won’t get into everything about King Herod but I can tell you that he was a very conflicted soul... on the one hand, he was like his father (Herod the Great) in that he accomplished great things on earth (he built temples and palaces and helped make Jerusalem more beautiful than Athens was in his own day)...

But historians have also described him as ‘lacking a conscience’ – in that he had two of his own sons and 10 of his in-laws killed – thousands of people who resisted his rule were all slaughtered – and he even had one of his many wives killed simply because he suspected that she had been unfaithful... and what’s even worse was that he had her body preserved in honey after she was dead (and the Talmud tells us that he continued relations with her corpse)...

And in our Gospel lesson this morning we learn that (on top of all of that) he had married his own brother’s wife... in other words, he stole away his sister-in-law (and married her) – which is taboo today (but also violated God’s Law)...

And according to the story, only John the Baptist found the courage to speak out against King Herod... and because he speaks out (King Herod has him arrested and thrown in prison)...

But here’s the interesting thing – the Bible tells us that King Herod liked to listen to John the Baptist... it says that he feared him, caused him to be *perplexed* (but that he also respected him and saw John as a *righteous and holy man*)... in many ways, John the Baptist was the only voice of reason that King Herod had in his life... you might even say – John the Baptist acted as King Herod’s conscience (the same way our own conscience warns us when we’re doing something wrong)... when we’re doing something that can get us into trouble...

And so, our Gospel lesson this morning is really acting as a mirror for us this morning – hoping that we might see ourselves in the role of King Herod – and

asking the question, “What will he do?... Will he turn back to God and save his soul?... or will he ignore his conscience and lose it?... what will he do?” ...

Well, we all know that rather than listen to the voice of reason he has John the Baptist killed... and what’s even more interesting is that historians outside of the Church tell us that not only did King Herod lose his throne at the end of his life (but that he also lost his mind as well)...

Friends, the point that I’m trying to make this morning is that the decisions that we make – matter... and although you might not be tempted with the same things that King Herod was tempted with – if they lead you away from serving God (they will lead you to the same place)... to a place of anguish, suffering, and shame...

and when you ignore the voice of reason – when you ignore your conscience – when you ignore God’s Word – the Bible tells us that walk on the edge of an abyss (that can take you places that you don’t want to go – and may never return from)...

But that’s why we also encourage one another to open up the Scriptures (immerse ourselves in God’s Word) – pray before decisions are made – seek out those who are serving God (and then listen for God to speak to you)... because when God gives you direction in your life (it may not always be the easy road to walk) but it will be the right road... and it will eventually lead you to find blessing, and peace, and joy...

You know, let me close with another story that I’ve been thinking about this week... a story that has always reminded me of how important every decision we make to serve God really is... it’s a true story about a man named Nicholas Winton (who was born a Jew in England – but was later converted to Christianity and was baptized)... a story that I posted on our Facebook page for you to look at later...

And according to the story – Nicholas Winton was working as a stockbroker (just before the Second World War started)... and although he started to become concerned with the way that the Germans were treating the Jews in Eastern Europe he made the decision at first to stay out of it (and tend to his own life)...

But he mentioned how there was an inner voice in his head that encouraged him to do something... to get involved (even if it was in a small way)... and according to the story, he had planned on going to Switzerland for a ski trip – but decided instead to meet a friend in Prague who was trying to rescue Jewish children (who were being sent off to concentration camps throughout Europe)...

What's interesting about the story was how engrossed Nicholas Winton had become: during the day he worked as a stockbroker – and then all night long he worked to save the children (by raising 50 pounds per child so that they could get a train ticket and find a host site in England)...

Well, this went on for a while – but ended once the war broke out (and it was impossible to continue doing)... and for nearly 50 years Nicholas Winton kept the whole thing to himself... but in 1988 some of his family members discovered a list of the children's names (the ones that he saved – all 669 of them)... and to keep a long story short he was invited on a British television program (called *That's Life*) where he saw the full blessing of his decision to serve God...

And when the host was finished telling his story she also asked, “And is there anyone here today who owes their life to Nicholas Winton?” – and with that, the whole audience stood up and gave applause...

And today (almost 85 years later) – there are more than 6000 descendants who have been blessed with life (because of one man's decision to serve God)...

Friends, the point of sharing that story is to remind you that every decision you make in this lifetime (matters)... and yes, we all know that there are temptations to stray – distractions that pull us away at times – and even excuses we may come up with for not doing the right thing...

But do yourself a favor – and choose to serve God (in the decisions that you're wrestling with right now) – because when you serve God (you bring His light into this broken world) something that the powerful King Herod failed to do...

May the blessings of our Father in Heaven bring you great joy in living... May His love and His peace help you to always make wise decisions... and may the goodness of your life – touch the lives of others...

In Jesus' name we pray...

Amen...