February 1, 2015 All Saints’ Church

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany Year B

Deuteronomy 18:15-20 I Corinthians 8:1-13

Psalm 111 Mark 1:21-28

When I was 8 months pregnant with Lizzy, my second daughter, I was just finishing my second year as Associate Priest at Church of the Heavenly Rest in New York City. It was August and all the other clergy were on vacation. I was in charge!

Saturday morning, August 7, 1993, around 2:30 am, I awoke to fire alarms. I was living in the rectory, which was above the church. I escaped with Cahaley, my four year old daughter on my hip, and Helga, our hysterical au pair, by my hand, as we walked down the five flights, using the back stairs, into the church gym, into black inky smoke, so black that I could barely see the EXIT signs, past raging flames that were just on the other side of the wall, which we could see through the windows, down the hall, and out the door into the hands of fireman trying to break through the iron gates. Fortunately, I had my ring of keys. My hands were shaking as I opened the gate. As I stepped into the streets, the firemen decked out in their beautiful fire gear, asked me, “Who are you?”

“I am the priest.”

“Really, as they looked down at “my condition.” Are you sure? I found out later they were Irish Catholic, from Staten Island. A call for firemen to come from all boroughs had been issued.

“Yes, I am sure. And I live here; I don’t think there is anyone else in the church. Our shelter is closed on the weekends. Please hurry- the flames are raging.”

For the next four hours over 100 firemen fought the four alarm fire, and through their courage and perseverance and stamina, they saved the church and our glorious stained glass windows. When the fire was declared “beat” the firemen were doing cart wheels and hand springs in the street. I was in shock, I am sure, and the captain could see how overwhelmed I was. There was so much destruction. “I know it looks bad, but we never save churches. We’re celebrating.”

We couldn’t return to the rectory, not yet anyway, because of the damage, and a parishioner who was away for August gave us her apartment to use.

I still have vivid memories of that first week, post-fire in a home not our own. Nervous, tired, hungry, but couldn’t eat, anxious, jittery, sleep deprived, and coughing, I was a wreck. And I was worried about Cahaley. She didn’t want to talk about what had happened; instead we played a game, endlessly.

I was the Bad Witch, instructed to cackle, to be mean, and to pull a black cape over my face, and to throw her doll into the Lake of Fire, gleeful that the little girl was drowning.

And then we would run to a post in the living room, bend down and hide, and then I was transformed, miraculously by Cahaley, into the Good Witch, who would leave her place of hiding, dive in, reach the little girl who was drowning, and bring her to safety.

Fine…. A great game, but then, immediately, after saving the little girl, I became the Bad Witch, and the game started all over. We played this game incessantly, over and over again. Bad Witch, Good Witch, Bad Witch, Good Witch.

By the third day, I got it: Cahaley was telling me something- I was ***literally*** both the Bad Witch and the Good Witch. I was the Bad Witch because I had not protected her from the abject horror of having to leave a burning building. But I was the Good Witch because I had saved her.

I brought her to the couch, held her close and said, “Honey, I am so sorry that the fire happened. Sometimes things are just bigger than Life and I couldn’t stop the fire. It was very scary. I am very sorry. And we are coughing and we are exhausted. The fire was very powerful. But we are alive; we held on, and we were saved; God was with us. Sometimes, things are really awful; bad things happen, out of my control, but we will always have each other, and I will never leave you.”

And with that, Cahaley sighed, like a prayer, and rested her head on my belly. We were quiet for a while, and then she listened for her sister’s heartbeat and for movement. We didn’t play the game anymore.

I tell you this story because sometimes, if not often, Life is bigger than we are. And there is not much we can do about it. This is obvious. And yet, by naming how real and terrifying things can be, the fear can become less. Not because terrible things will vanish, but we can gain courage and fear can be faced. We are not alone. We have Jesus.

This morning in our Gospel passage, Jesus walks into a synagogue and teaches with authority. He is different from the teachers before because the scribes and religious leaders relied on repeating the ancient wisdom of their elders. They were not creative. Jesus is relying on his own interpretation. He is preaching, rooted in prayer, compassion and love.

And then the Demons appear. They interrupt. They are bigger than life. They recognize Jesus as a threat. They are noisy, full of talk, multiple, and resistant. They have taken possession of a man and are destroying him. They see and name Jesus as the Holy One of God, not as a title of reverence, but rather as a way to attack- they identify Jesus as the enemy. “What are you going to do with us,” they taunt?

And Jesus rebukes them. “Be silent.” A better translation of the Greek is “Shut Up” or maybe even better, “Muzzle it.” And he casts them away by not some object or religious talisman, but by his Voice, by his Very Word. By his power, he rids them, “be gone.”

This is a terrifying scene and we will miss its magnitude, if we think this encounter is just about some form of teaching. Jesus is taking on Evil and wins.

Jesus knows how to name what is evil and without hesitation challenges the forces that would like to have their way. This is no tame Jesus. He discerns, he acts, and he saves.

I think, sometimes, as a way to protect our children and ourselves from experiencing the evil forces in our world, we deny or ignore or minimize them. Of course it’s our natural inclination, and when we can, we should protect our children’s innocence, but sometimes we need to name destructive powers as well.

If we don’t, we water down the power of Jesus. And we water down the power of prayer. Sometimes prayer is the only arsenal we have. This is why stories like the Narnia tales, or Harry Potter or the Hobbit are so popular with children. Life can be dark; evil is real; betrayal happens, children can get hurt; parents can fail, disappointment and weakness and fear can reign. Our children, even in their safety, know that there are children who are hurting. They may not have a word for it, but they know evil exists.

Our heroes in these fantastic tales of Good vs. Evil, learn, eventually, to ***trust***, and to believe in something more powerful than who they are, and to surrender to it gladly. The power in all of these popular stories is the power of sacrificial love. The authors have all taken a page directly from our gospel truth.

Just as it happened to me, we can find ourselves in the role of” good witch and bad witch,” because we won’t be able to control what comes our way. Life happens and it has power and it can overwhelm. Yet, we can believe in something more powerful than we are- and we can teach our children that Jesus has power…. He has the discerning capacity to name evil, to confront it, to throw himself at it, even onto death, and then to conquer it. Death never has the last word, Jesus does. Love, in the end, wins through its power and through God’s presence.

Faith is the gift of believing in God, a power greater than all, and to surrender to it gladly.

AMEN.