

# Bringing Satan Crashing Down

*A sermon on Luke 10:1-11, 16-20 by Nathan Nettleton, 3 July 2016*

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## Message

Election week sheds new light on how we can participate with Jesus in bringing satanic principalities and powers crashing down.

## Sermon

The weekend of a Federal election seems like the obvious time to preach about satanic powers, doesn't it?!! Actually, the election is not really what prompted my choice of topic. We follow a cycle of scripture readings that was set long before we knew there would be an election this weekend, and our set gospel reading for the day speaks of the disciples of Jesus getting excited about their new-found authority over demonic forces, and Jesus responding by saying that he had had a vision of the satan falling from heaven like lightning.

There is an awful lot of ridiculous over-blown crap spoken about the satan and demons in many of our churches, and sometimes in our desire to make sure we are not associated with any of that, we are a bit too embarrassed to say anything about them at all. That's not going to help. If we say nothing, then the crazies' voices will be the only ones anyone hears.

And actually, election weekend probably is a good time to pick up this topic. I don't know if you have noticed, but the Apostle Paul doesn't mention the satan very often. The phrase he uses a lot more, seemingly to refer to the same reality, is "the principalities and powers". That is a decidedly political sounding phrase, is it not? Even if it is not directly referring to human political systems, it is suggesting that human political systems are a natural illustration or metaphor for the satanic powers. So perhaps the election campaign and its confused aftermath have given us lots of images and examples with which to deepen our understanding of what Jesus is teaching us here.

What Jesus specifically says is that, presumably in some kind of vision, he has "watched the satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning." Or we might translate that as "I watched the satan come crashing down in a screaming heap." It is clearly an image of the defeat of the satan, or the ultimate failure and demise of the satanic powers. And that is reinforced when he adds that he has given his followers authority over the power of the enemy. I could perhaps play with the election imagery and suggest that the people discovered their authority over the major powers and brought them both crashing down, but that's not really what I'm thinking about.

If we are going to talk about what this biblical story means to us, we probably need to address a couple of key questions. Who or what is the satan, or the satanic enemy powers? And what is it that is happening among the followers of Jesus, among us, that prompts Jesus to catch a glimpse of the crashing failure of the satan? I guess that will lead us to a further question about how we can play our part in the demise of satanic power in our world. And I will make some more connections to the election campaign as we go.

Let's look first at the context in which Jesus reports his vision. Jesus has appointed seventy of his followers to go out in pairs as a kind of mission advance party. Or perhaps like campaign volunteers out door knocking. The message he asked them to proclaim, funnily enough, had

nothing to do with tightening border protection, keeping the muslims at bay, or opposing same-sex marriage, despite what you might have thought from some of the so-called Christian parties in the election. The message he asked them to proclaim was firstly a message of peace, and secondly, wherever the word of peace was welcomed, an assurance that the kingdom of God had drawn near. In other words, as you welcome peace, the culture of God can be seen to be emerging in your midst.

In the version we heard, from Luke's gospel, there is no mention in Jesus's instructions about casting out demons. They are told to bring healing to the sick, but there is no mention of demons. But when the seventy return, the thing they are all talking about is discovering that when they went out preaching peace, the demonic forces seemed to be put to flight.

When the Christian crazies start talking about demons and the satan, they frequently invoke the language of warfare. They go hunting out signs of the demonic, and rally the troops to wage fierce spiritual warfare. But here in this story, there is no hint of such an aggressive attitude. It is proclaiming peace and welcome that causes demonic power to crumble. Jesus does not even suggest that the seventy be careful about the moral or religious credentials of those from whom they accept hospitality. To anyone who welcomes the word of peace and offers welcome and hospitality, the promise is given that the culture of God is emerging among them. And when the culture of God begins emerging, begins taking hold among people of peace and hospitality, the satan can be seen crashing down in a screaming heap.

But who or what is this satan that Jesus sees crashing down? And what is the connection between the crash and the embrace of peace and hospitality?

You may be wondering why I am referring to "the" satan, and if you are following the written version of this, you may have noticed that I don't write satan with a capital S. The word satan is not a personal name. It is a job description or a role description. Or perhaps even a description of a principle or a spiritual current. We sometimes talk about things like a mob mentality, or a wave of hatred sweeping through a crowd. Many of the biblical descriptions of the satan are more like that. That's why the Apostle Paul uses the more impersonal description of the "principalities and powers".

There are a few places, like the opening of the book of Job and the story of the temptation of Jesus, where the satan is depicted as an individual being, but there are also places where other things like love and wisdom are personified for dramatic effect. I don't know whether the personification of the satan is literal or metaphorical, and I don't really care. Sometimes thinking of it as a person is helpful, but it is much more important to understand what it does and how it infiltrates us, and for the most part we will only experience that as a spiritual influence, as a cultural force, as principalities and powers.

When I say that the satan is not a name, but a job description, what sort of job is it? The word has its origins in the law courts. In a criminal trial in the ancient world, the satan is the prosecutor or the accuser; the one who brings the charges against you. But as we see in that heavenly law-court scene at the start of the book of Job, the satan will also bring accusations against the innocent, and act maliciously to try to trick or force innocent people into either sinning or at least believing in their own guilt. The satan is like the corrupt interrogator who will use physical torture and psychological abuse to break down people until they will confess to anything.

Usually though, the satan is less interested in getting people to condemn themselves and more interested in securing the guilty verdict from the jury, the watching crowd. So the first sign of the satan's work is the accusingly pointed finger. When the finger is pointed and the accusation is made that that one is the problem, and everyone starts going "Yeah, they're the problem. Let's do something about them." It is so contagious that soon everyone is chanting "Crucify him! Crucify him!" And the satan's work is off and running.

Perhaps you can see why election weekend seemed like an easy time to illustrate this. There is an awful lot of finger pointing that goes on in an election campaign. An awful lot of accusing and blaming. Both sides are trying to stir us up into a frenzy of blaming the other side for all our problems and all our fears. The irony this time is that people may have believed both sides and rejected them both. Perhaps more sinister though, when they are not pointing the finger at one another, they are pointing the finger at someone else, and identifying them as a threat to our welfare, jobs and security and promising that they alone can protect us. For the last decade and half the usual scapegoats of choice have been refugees and asylum seekers, especially Muslim refugees and asylum seekers.

This is the absolute classic satanic strategy; to fan the fires of suspicion, hatred and fear. You can see how it is a direct assault on Jesus's strategy of building a culture of loving neighbours and enemies alike, and taking special care of the least of these, the poor, the orphans, the refugees, and the detainees. A divided society at war with itself, where love of others becomes more and more difficult is what results from us catching the satanic contagion of finger-pointing and accusation. We saw this in the recent brexit vote in the UK too, where the primary motivation for separating from Europe was fear of refugees and a desire to close the borders and turn our backs on offering hospitality.

Closer to home, the satanic dimension of this fear is even more apparent. Not so long ago, it was still possible, even in developed western countries, to get almost absolute unanimity when we pointed the finger of blame against some minority group. The White Australia policy with its violent suppression of indigenous Australians and Chinese immigrants had overwhelming majority support for a long time. We all believed that they were evil and dangerous, less than human, and that our genocidal policy was making the world a better place. Look too at Germany pointing the finger at Jews, Gypsies and homosexuals in the 1930s and 40s.

It has become more complicated for satanic hatred to achieve that sort of unanimity in recent decades, because more and more of us have been learning to question the blamers and to look at the world through the eyes of the victims. Which is precisely why those who seek to build their power on fuelling fear of refugees now have to keep them out of sight, locked up in concentration camps in remote and hidden locations. And it is precisely why those who seek to strengthen their churches around campaigns against "the gay agenda" will never encourage their people to dialogue with homosexual people.

We can no longer be trusted to maintain our hostility if we are given the opportunity to look into their eyes. Thanks be to God! This is actually a long term consequence of Jesus stepping into the role of the victim, to unmask the horrible truth that our victims are actually innocent, and that God is present among them and within them, being persecuted by us. It is precisely this revelation, working itself out in our lives, that brings the satan crashing down to earth.

So, returning to the specific imagery of our gospel story, how does this story invite us to participate in the bringing down of the satanic agenda? The obvious answer may not be the most helpful, although it is not wrong. This story talks about Jesus sending his followers out on mission, so the obvious application is to look at how we are being sent out on mission. Without discounting that, I want to take the less obvious path and turn it around. How might we respond as those to whom Jesus sends his messengers? You see, I think that what prompted Jesus to catch a glimpse of the satan crashing down to earth was the reception offered to the disciples, not so much simply their going.

Did you notice Jesus's line about sending his messengers out like lambs into the midst of wolves? In light of what I've just been saying about the hostile and dangerous climate created by satanic accusation, who might be those who walk among us like lambs amidst wolves? Is it not the same ones of whom Jesus says "What you do to them, you do to me." Is it not the poor, the refugees, the different, the outcasts, the detainees? Perhaps we need to take Jesus more literally here, and look first at how we receive those who Jesus is sending to us, those who embody Jesus in their brokenness and lamb-like vulnerability.

In a world where the satan is inciting everyone to behave with the defensive aggression of cornered wolves, when we welcome in the vulnerable refugees who come seeking asylum, the satan can be seen crashing down to earth.

In a world where the satan is inciting everyone to strengthen their borders and go to war with every perceived threat, when we receive our enemies with genuine gestures of grace and we speak peace to potential hostility, the satan can be seen crashing down to earth.

In a world where the satan is inciting everyone to cling fearfully to their own resources, when we share what we have generously with those who come as signs of peace and hope, for the labourer deserves to be paid, the satan can be seen crashing down to earth.

In a world where the satan is inciting everyone to point their fingers at others but turn their faces away, when we look into the eyes of the victims and recognise and honour the Christ in them, the satan can be seen crashing down to earth.

When we welcome the seeds sown among us and the culture of God takes root and begins to emerge and flourish, full of grace and peace and welcome and love for all, the satan can be seen crashing down to earth.

In a few minutes, we will be enacting this very move right here. Jesus will be here, at our table, offering himself to us in his brokenness and woundedness, as a victim of our satanic finger-pointing and scapegoating. His peace will rest on us and remain with us if we will welcome him. And as we practice welcoming him here, we learn how to continue welcoming him outside here, in our homes, in our workplaces, in our neighbourhoods, in our ballot boxes. And the culture of God will emerge, and the demonic powers will cringe away in horror and the satan will well and truly come crashing down to earth in a screaming heap.