

Nokesville UMC Sunday Worship [Lent III]

March 7, 2021

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Evil is normal.

Genesis 3:1-6

(1)

Last Lent in 2020, we had a sermon series with the movie “Silence,” directed by Martin Scorsese in 2016, which is based on the novel of the same name by Japanese novelist Shusaku Endo. On the first Sunday in Lent in 2020, we talked about the difference between *Missio Christi* and *Missio Dei* with the keyword “mission.” On the second Sunday, we talked about the reason why the gospel about Jesus Christ spread among the lower class in Japan with the keyword “acceptance.” I posted the two sermons on our Facebook page and our church website (www.nokesvilleumc.com). If you are available, please listen to them. It will help you understand the following sermons.

After the second Sunday on March 8, 2020, the pandemic broke out throughout the nation. We closed our sanctuary, and the sermon series was suspended without any promise of return. And I am very glad to resume the sermon series for the following Sundays. With the movie and/or the book “Silence,” I hope your faith will be deepened during the season of Lent in 2021. In the third session, today, we will talk about “evil.”

(2)

The two missionaries—Rodrigues and Garupe—finally arrived at Nagasaki of Japan and began to deliver the gospel to the people in mountain villages in secret. But they witnessed severe persecution and death of Japanese Kirishitans keeping their faith, and they heard that Japanese guards were chasing them; so, they decided to go their separate ways. And then, the camera keeps following Rodrigues and closing up on his footsteps. But shortly, Padre Rodrigues was caught and stood before Governor and Inquisitor Inoue. (video)

In the movie, Inoue Sama¹ is described as an antagonist to not only Padre Rodrigues but also all Japanese Kirishitans. From the eyes of Japan, he is the guardian of Japanese power, authority, feudalism, culture, and religions. From the eyes of missionaries, on the other hand, he is the persecutor of Kirishitans. In a way, he is represented as pure evil in the movie. (video)

From time to time, he lost his temper and frowned, but he had a gentle and benevolent smile on his face with an even tone of voice from beginning to end. He looks like an ordinary neighborhood grandpa. He also never forced Japanese Kirishitans and Rodrigues to apostatize from Christianity. He constantly gives them time and an opportunity to make a decision by themselves. The way of apostasy is very simple. They just need to step on a copperplate of Jesus, a so-called “Fumie.”² And Inoue tries to persuade Padre Rodrigues by saying, “It depends on you whether they [Japanese Kirishitans] are set free, if you say just one single word. Show them. Deny your faith.” “If you are a real man, a truly good priest, you should feel pity for the Kirishitans. The price for your glory is their suffering.” “Step on Jesus.” There seems nothing strange if Padre Rodrigues would deny his faith and apostatize.

¹ Sama (さま) is a more formal version of san. Usually used to refer to customers who are deserving of the utmost respect status in Japan, people of higher rank, or somebody people admire. (www.wikipedia.com)

² A *fumi-e* (踏み絵, *fumi* “stepping-on” + *e* “picture”) was a likeness of Jesus or Mary onto which the religious authorities of the Tokugawa Shogunate of Japan required suspected Christians (Kirishitan) to step, in order to demonstrate that they were not members of that outlawed religion. (www.wikipedia.com)

(3)

Today's passage is a well-known story about the first people's fall by the serpent. The serpent was a manifestation of evil. Last April, a black snake coiling itself was in the parking garage of the parsonage. When I first found it, I was in a panic and yelled out loud. And I barely drew it away from the parsonage with a long tree branch. I still remember the feeling on my hands when I first touched the snake with the branch. A snake is the animal that I fear the most. When the serpent first appeared to the woman, however, she did not fear or was not stunned. They talked naturally to each other. I assume that a serpent might be one of the friendly animals around her. With a normal appearance, evil appeared to her. And the goal of evil was a very simple one—it was to break the relationship between God and humankind.

The serpent said to the first woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" (v. 1) And she answered, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden [except the one] of the tree in the middle of the garden. [If we touch or eat it] we shall die" (vv. 2-3). What was the serpent's response? "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (v. 5). The serpent never forced her to eat the fruit. He constantly tried to persuade her with pleasing and plausible words, and finally let her decide for herself. She took and ate it, and gave some to her partner, and he also ate it. Is that it? No. When she stood before God, she said to God, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate" (v. 13b). The serpent gave her an opportunity to justify herself before God. The evil in the movie and in Scripture was very normal.

(4)

The book "Eichmann in Jerusalem (1963)," written by Hannah Arendt, describes the 1960 trial of Nazi war criminal Adolf Enchimann, who was responsible for engineering the mass slaughter of millions of European Jews. Before the trial, people assumed Enchimann's appearance with typical evil men and believed that he would be genuinely contrite before the world. However, their expectations were way off. He was a slim-figured, middle-aged man with crooked teeth, myopia, and gray hair. He was an average man whom they could find in their neighborhood. In addition, Eichmann was charged with 15 counts, but he said he is not guilty. He insisted that, as a civil servant, he just followed the orders of the Nazi government and faithfully did his job. His mental condition was extremely normal, and his neighbors testified that he was a very positive and gentle neighbor. In the book, the author introduces the concept of the "banality of evil." That is, evil does throughout history—including the Holocaust—were not done by fanatics or sociopaths but by ordinary people who conform to their nations and believe themselves that they are normal.

In some way, evil is closer to us than we expect with diverse forms of banality. Evil manifests in various forms, stays around us, and watches for the chance to break us from God, from people, and from nature. Do you see what is going on in Myanmar? The Myanmar military, who were made up of their citizens and defended them against foreign threats, now point their guns at the citizens themselves. Like Eichmann, do the soldiers believe themselves that they are not guilty? Open your eyes, and you will come to see the evil that hides himself in banality. What is more, we also should admit the possibility that we can be the banality of evil. In front of the people, we could try to show ourselves as a gentle, good, and faithful person, but behind these things, we could sprout the seed of violence, oppression, separation, hatred, and many others. Resist evil and be closer to God.