

Zechariah 13:1-6

13 On that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity.² On that day, says the LORD of hosts, I will cut off the names of the idols from the land, so that they shall be remembered no more; and also, I will remove from the land the prophets and the unclean spirit.³ And if any prophets appear again, their fathers and mothers who bore them will say to them, “You shall not live, for you speak lies in the name of the LORD”; and their fathers and their mothers who bore them shall pierce them through when they prophesy.⁴ On that day the prophets will be ashamed, every one, of their visions when they prophesy; they will not put on a hairy mantle in order to deceive,⁵ but each of them will say, “I am no prophet, I am a tiller of the soil; for the land has been my possession since my youth.”⁶ And if anyone asks them, “What are these wounds on your chest?” the answer will be “The wounds I received in the house of my friends.”

Mark 1:21-28

²¹They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Lies, Damn Lies, and the Unclean Spirit

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Zechariah 13:1-6; Mark 1:21-28

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Scripture has a lot to say about lying, as does the Westminster Larger Catechism, which for a long time was a teaching tool of the church. The ninth commandment reminds us, using the language of brevity, not to bear false witness against a neighbor; and yet, the catechism's teaching on which sins are forbidden by just that one verse includes a wide range of no-nos. They include the language of the justice system: thou shalt not - give false evidence, call upon false witnesses, or hand out unjust sentences. It is a sin to call evil good and good evil, or to reward the wicked according to the work of the righteous and the righteous according to the work of the wicked. Oh, and it dives into the realm of personal relationships to say, no speaking untruth, lying, slandering, backbiting, talebearing, whispering, scoffing, or reviling – and in a stroke of great genius, they included the notion that it is a falsehood when we are even THINKING or speaking too highly or too meanly of ourselves or others. The committees writing Westminster were nothing, if not thorough. I could go on. They didn't stop there. They have quite an extensive vocabulary for calling out what it means to bear false witness!

And yet, if you were to drop the drafters of the Westminster Catechism into our own day and time, they might have to dedicate a lot more work into naming the creative efforts that our modern culture has come up with for demolishing the truth. Just for one small example, we have a current member of the House in the United States Congress who posted on Facebook just three years ago that she believed that the California wildfires were started by a prominent Jewish family who had satellite technology that incidentally were part of setting the state ablaze. Given

her new position of leadership, this old post started trending on Twitter recently with the hashtag #JewishSpaceLasers. Though my husband and I had a laugh about that with my Rabbi friend - the truth is, it's not really funny. Conspiracy theories like this one are hate filled propaganda meant to rile up the disenfranchised and give them an enemy to blame. And like the rumor, they are meant to spread faster than wildfire. This is how a single lie can become exactly what Westminster is talking about when it says we are forbidden in the commandments to call evil good and good evil.

People have always, ALWAYS had the desire and the depravity to shape our stories to fit our own liking. In Zechariah's day, in Jesus' day – they might not have had Facebook or Twitter, and yet they knew exactly the kind of damage that could be done when we play fast and loose with the truth. God demands our honesty, our authenticity, or true selves as part of our best offering. You may be able to get away with a lie or two on your public profile or on your resume, but you can't ever lie to God.

Its insidious really. And figuring out the lengths to which we might be deceived or be able to deceive others is worth some Sunday morning soul searching. Scripture itself calls out at least three different levels of lying, which I am calling: lies, damn lies, and unclean spirits – so let's plunge into the deep end of the pool and consider how lying is called out in our holy book.

To be deceived is something we have all experienced. Then in our own misunderstandings, sometimes we have shared false information – unknowingly or unthinkingly. Sometimes we have hidden truth we don't like or information we think will upset somebody else. Whether they be innocent mistakes or intentional nastiness, these cover a lot of your basic, garden variety lies. And when we lie like this in the context of our relationships, we are given every opportunity to fess up, to admit when we have spread an untruth, and move on. I, and other priestly, prophetic,

pastoral types in scripture have some sympathy for those who live in a lie-drenched culture and get stuck occasionally misrepresenting information as true when it isn't. You can usually tell the difference between the Uncle who cuts and pastes his Facebook status to go along with the people he thinks think like him, and the *source* of that false information who intends to get people to go along perpetuating lies and hatred for whatever is the "out-group" of the day. And for those of you thinking about your most out there, Fox News watching Uncle or acquaintance who is an "I'm calling the manager" entitled suburbanite, this can also go the way of taking a retaliating dig with a sarcastic post that indicates how one is so much more enlightened than everyone else who has been sucked in by the drama. Been there, done that. It isn't pretty. Lies and the liars who perpetrate them love to catch people on every spot on the political and theological spectrum. So, it's always good advice to watch your tongue and now your fingers on a keyboard too.

This is where we meet Zechariah and can begin to identify the category that I would call "damned lies." This prophet is certainly critical of his own nation for being swayed by false idols and lies, and yet, he has the harshest of words for those who tell lies in the name of the Lord. Frankly, I'm right there with him. In my mind I too reserve a few ugly words for those who consistently besmirch the idea of who God is by the kind of hateful ideas they spread in God's name. Zechariah is ready to have them run through, pierced by a sword, at the hands of their closest relatives and dearest friends. Truth be told, I rather liked this idea, maybe a little too much. The words that come at the end of this passage are tremendously powerful, and I can't say that I remember coming across them before in my biblical studies. He pressures these false prophets to denounce themselves, and claim that they are simply tillers of the soil. Then, if

anyone asks them, “What are those wounds on your chest?” they are to respond, “The wounds I received in the house of my friends.”

Ouch. I think this means that we have not only a responsibility for our own selves to keep truth on our lips and in our hearts, but to challenge our relatives, our friends particularly when they have lied in God’s name. To spread false information about a person is to break a commandment. To spread false information about God is blasphemy. It’s a new level, and yes, it matters a great deal. It’s the idea of leading others astray, of teaching by means of fear rather than out of love, and it is destructive. This kind of false narrative about God is pervasive in our culture. It has become the means by which so-called Christian leaders have gained power and wealth, and it is how they have spread their own limited view of who belongs in God’s kingdom. It isn’t right. And it has been allowed to fester.

My friends, challenging the damned lies will be difficult. It is wounding to be the one doing the piercing. It is wounding to be the one left run through. No doubt, it leaves a scar. But we have passed through times like this before – like the nation of Israel before us. When we become a culture of lies, the narrative HAS to change. The idols HAVE to be broken. Then, finally, the unclean spirits MUST be exorcised.

Jesus is a story-changer. He is OUR story-changer. And his words of truth send demons scurrying. His radical authenticity was a sign and seal of his closeness with God. He had the ability to speak directly to the unclean spirits and have them leave the body of the person they inhabited. These stories are a strange to us. We don’t have Presbyterian exorcisms. And yet, I think I am beginning to understand how deception can run so deep that the spirit of the lie can be thought to inhabit the person. Lies of the spirit are immediately and intensely threatened when they encounter the truth.

The unclean spirit in this particular story asks Jesus, “Have you come to destroy us?” The answer is yes, yes he has. An unclean spirit can’t do very much without a human body to do its dirty work. Jesus calls it out, tells it to shut up, causing the person carrying it to shudder and cry out. I’m not sure why the gospel writers would use the word for unclean when I would be more likely to use the word for evil in the way that I read this story. Jesus can recognize evil and ask it to leave – and it obeys him. This is the most intense form of lying there is, when the person is completely covered up by a spirit of harm and deception, and scripture has illustrations for it while we typically don’t. We tend to want to put a psychological spin on evil when there are times when that doesn’t explain all that’s happening. This kind of lie isn’t a forgivable offense, or clutching for power in God’s name. It is, in a spiritual sense, demonic, the kind of spirit that is NOT of God. And the only remedy is to extract it. The closest picture I can come to explaining this is to note those who are so deep into cult-like obedience to a leader as to lose their own sense of reality, OR so without a conscience or any empathy for other human beings that our usual methods for helping them change their behavior just don’t work. Deprogramming and exposing them to truth after truth is the only hope there is left.

All that said, I want to make sure that we don’t get confused and think that having an unclean spirit is identical to having a mental illness. Sometimes, in an attempt to understand ancient wisdom, we swap ideas that may not be ideologically consistent. I want to say that some people are ROBBED of the truth because of mental illness – but it doesn’t mean they are affected by an unclean spirit. I say that because I have been watching it happen over this past year with my mother. If only I could use Jesus’ words and cast out the spirit of Alzheimer’s disease, I would gladly do so. Alzheimer’s disease has not only taken her memory, I have watched it distort her reality with paranoia. To not see her car in the parking lot can only mean one thing – someone

has stolen it – and there’s no convincing her otherwise. It’s deeply grieving. Given that she was someone who prided herself on being an independent woman, to watch her lose touch with the truth is awful, and what’s even more awful is that the best advice to those who love her is not to argue or correct her, but just to help comfort her. I know it’s not being intentionally deceptive, but it just doesn’t feel quite “right” either. Entering her reality is painful – for all the rest of the family.

Lies, damned lies, and the unclean spirit. For the regular lies – we have a solution – repent, clear the air, tell the truth. For the damned lies – it gets harder – when our faith demands that we rid our communities of the idols and false prophets, even if it means piercing relationships with some people that have been close to us. Later in the gospels, Jesus teaches his disciples how to cast out unclean spirits – just as he was able to do. Unfortunately, we have no instruction manual for that one. Though I think I know evil when I see it – I always find myself hesitant to name it, especially since those who are comfortable naming evil are often also filled with hate. Jesus was filled with love. He was full of the truth. His authority and authenticity seemed to be recognized by just about everyone, and when it wasn’t, it seems clear in the gospels that those who hated his teaching wanted that kind of power for themselves.

What I’m really discovering in this past year with my Mom, and through 2020, the year of pandemic and political chaos, is that truth is such an important tether to reality. As people of faith, we need to keep it and guard it. We need to protect those who would be swayed by the damned liars to spread untruth far and wide. We need to care for those whose truth is skewed by the torment of mind or body. We need to call evil – evil, instead of calling evil – good. Nations and individuals can both be caught up in the spirit of the lie. Maybe we need to think about appropriate exorcisms, the calling out that may leave some crying or convulsing, and yet cleared

to live into the truth. For too long, we have believed the lie that the poor are valued less than the rich, that the color of one's skin determines one's place in society, that men are worth more than women, I could go on and on. And yet, when these lies are called out of us, we become free. The gospels call it healed, or made whole, or saved – and I believe it. When the unclean spirits leave us, we can more closely follow truth, we can more closely follow Jesus. Amen.