

The Protest of Hope

I don't believe in the devil. That is to say, while I certainly believe in the pervasive presence of evil in the world, I don't believe in a literal incarnation of malevolence – the red guy with the horns and the pitchfork or the suave fallen angel often depicted in pop culture. But, as a writer of young adult fantasy fiction, I spend an incredible amount of time thinking about what a literal incarnation of evil might look like – how such a being might move and act in the world. I've actually put a lot of effort into creating just such a character, and much of that work has centered around this question: what kind of environment does this man need to create in order for him to succeed in his quest to gain power? In other words, in what context does evil flourish?

I imagine that many of you have heard the quote, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing." That certainly figured into my understanding of this character. Okay, so this guy wants good people to do nothing. This guy wants complacency. But that raises a secondary question, right? Why *do* good people do nothing? I mean, if they're good people, we can reasonably assume that they *want* to do something. If they're good people, we can reasonably assume that they're not just indifferent to the suffering of others. So why wouldn't they act?

I'm guessing that you all have some answers to that (e.g. people are shades of good and sometimes oppression or injustice benefit them; sometimes they aren't aware or educated; sometimes they're burned out; sometimes they're overwhelmed; sometimes they don't know what to do). I think all of these are valid, but what's really resonated with me recently – especially given all that's going on in our world and in our own lives – is hopelessness. Let me explain. When we have hope, we have the capacity to imagine the world differently. We have the capacity to imagine our lives differently. When we have hope, we believe that things could change for the better. When we have hope, we implicitly reject the notion that we are powerless because we see possibilities for creative transformation. It takes hope – even if it's just a glimmer, even if it's just a flickering flame – to resist complacency in the face of suffering, injustice, and despair. Hopelessness breeds narratives of inaction. After all, why should I act if there is no hope of things ever changing? Why should I act if it is beyond the realm of possibility that my action will make a difference? Why should I act if I cannot even *imagine* what a world transformed might look like? So the bottom line for this incarnate evil character that I'm creating is that he wants people to be hopeless because hopeless people aren't a threat to him. Hopeless people aren't going to resist him. Hopeless people, even if they're good people, aren't going to *do* anything to stop him.

So the next question for me as a writer is this: how do you make people hopeless?

What disturbs me most is that I'm finding the answer to this question by looking at people within my own communities and by noticing what's happening within me. What I'm seeing is that when people feel powerless, it's like fertilizing the field where the seeds of hopelessness are sown. And people start to feel powerless when they're faced with injustice after injustice, personal tragedy after personal tragedy, act of oppression after act of oppression, lived hardship after lived hardship. People start to feel powerless when there is *so much* that seems broken and *so little* that they have control over. People start to feel powerless when there is *so much* that seems broken and no clear answer as to what they might *do* to bring healing – either to themselves or the world around them.

Does that sound familiar to anyone else? We've been lamenting children being separated from their parents at the border while standing with our friends here who have watched illness and death claim multiple people in their circle of loved ones. We've been raising our voices in

anger at the rising poverty in our nation while supporting members of our own community who seem to be pursued by mishap and calamity. We've been resisting the rising tide of hate while weeping with friends whose lives are unraveling. From the international and national all the way to the personal, it seems like it doesn't stop. And we've started asking: what can we do? There is so much, what can we possibly do? There is so much, how do we possibly know where to start? And, you know, we are *not* doing nothing. We're acting on behalf of immigrants by being a sanctuary church. We're acting on behalf of children through our partnership with the school and our camp. We're acting on behalf of the hungry through our work with Paul's Place. We support members of our communities by offering a listening ear and a welcoming shoulder in times of grief. We support members of our communities by standing beside them as they advocate for themselves. We support members of our communities by providing encouragement, prayer, and advice when it's requested. We are *not* doing nothing.

Yet we're still asking those questions – I think we're still starting to feel overwhelmed and powerless. So what do we do?

Well, I think the Israelites might have known a thing or two about what it's like to feel overwhelmed and powerless. They faced personal tragedy *and* oppression all at the same time, especially during the Babylonian exile – that time when Israel was destroyed by Babylon and so many people were deported to the far corners of the Babylonian empire. And yet, during that time they wrote songs like the one that we read today. And I think that Psalm 107 is particularly instructive for this season in our lives. Did you notice the many hardships detailed in the text? There are people lost in the desert and people lost on stormy seas. There are those imprisoned in doom and gloom and those suffering with illness (though we would say that God didn't cause these things, we still know what this kind of suffering feels like). There are those who are oppressed by wicked princes. The Psalmist is talking about calamity after calamity. It sounds kind of familiar, right? Yet there's this constant refrain...they cried out to the Lord their trouble and the Lord saved them from their distress. They cried out to the Lord.

There is a part of my brain – the snarky, cynical part – that says, '*really?*' That's the Psalmist's answer to this level of hardship? Cry out to the Lord? That seems like an anemic response.

But then I think about my character of incarnate evil, and I think about his desire to create hopeless people. Well, the act of crying out to the Lord is inherently an act of hope. No matter if you're crying out to curse God or crying out to ask for help; no matter if you're screaming profanities in anger or screaming words of anguish in grief, it is still an act of hope. Why? Because by crying out to the Lord you are acknowledging a power that is greater than yourself – which is, in turn, acknowledging that there is power that can change your life or the world. In the act of crying out to the Lord you are expressing the deep-seated conviction that things are not as they should be, which means that you can imagine the world and your life differently. The act of crying out to the Lord is inherently an act of hope – which makes it an act of protest. It is a protest against the cruelty, the hatred, the suffering, and the brokenness of the world. It is an act of protest that keeps us from giving into the sheer absurdity of inaction and the soul-crushing madness of powerlessness. It is an act of protest that opens us to creative possibility – that opens us to the nudging of the Spirit towards *other* transformative acts, that helps us to answer the question: what can I possibly do? The protest of hope in the form of crying out to the Lord is the first and last stand against the brutal power of despair. The protest of hope in the form of crying out to the Lord is our first and last stand against the hopelessness that allows evil to flourish.

We stand as witnesses to the brokenness in this world, in this nation, in this city, and in our own homes and communities. Like those who went down to the sea in mighty ships and saw the stormy wind lift the waves of the sea right up to the heavens, we see the stormy winds of injustice lift the waves of suffering high. So let us cry out to the Lord in our time of trouble! Let us raise our voices in the protest of hope! Let us cry out to the Lord in our time of trouble, and let us watch and listen for the Holy Spirit's call to action that will lead us out of our distress.

Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so.