

**March 21, 2021, the Fifth Sunday in Lent (Year B)
An Inside Job**

Jeremiah 31:31-34

³¹The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt — a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God

We all know that the murder rate in peaceful English villages is astoundingly high. Miss Marple, Detective Barnaby, and Father Brown are kept awfully busy chasing down miscreants and solving mysteries. Most of the time it isn't strangers from London, unless they call in Scotland Yard, it's an inside job. Local people with blackmail demands or cheating spouses are the causes of most disruptions in village life. As repeated in Pogo, “We have met the enemy, and he is us.”

We'd like to think evil is external, horned beasts with pitchforks, or people with different skin. It is the devil in the mirror, no not Alice's looking glass, the one you see each morning. I have some idea how that devil got in you. Not so much from an ancestor's apple tart as from simply being human. We are smart. Sadly we are smart enough to know better but go ahead and do bad stuff anyway. Certainly some are worse than others in that department. One of the reason twelve step programs are less effective in church has to do with mixed sins. If everyone in the room has come to wrestle with an addiction no one is saying, “Well I cheat on my taxes, but I never touch drugs.” That points toward a problem some of my Catholic friends have over us not recognizing venial vs mortal sins. Sin is sin, big ones and little ones are all symptoms of

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the same disease. It's not like a little sin is a sniffle and murder is the flu. It all stems from the same source, a broken relationship with God.

Way back before Mary had her baby in that stable prophets of Israel knew what it would take to make people all right with God. Strict obedience to laws written on stone tablets or on scrolls is beyond human capacity. What we need is to internalize those laws, to consume them so that the law is a part of us. Years spent contemplating, reciting, memorizing them will not implant the law in your heart. Paul lamented that he knew what to do but didn't do it until on the road to Damascus he met the embodiment of the law.

Sure, the devil within is our greatest enemy, but the devil is not alone in here. It might be nice if the Holy Spirit moved in and evicted the old deluder Satan, but the world is not nice like that. As it is out there in the creation so is it in each of us. The news serves up an ugly diet of the evil humans are capable of doing. Sometimes when we turn our minds to it the astounding depth of depravity can make one want to watch the Andy Griffith Show instead. Of course I never trusted the mayor who kept giving Sheriff Andy a hard time. The good time girls weren't so bad, just ornery. Do we have to retreat from the evil to see the good? That is a bit like denying the devil within.

What we Protestants have done with confession is a bit of a shame. Sure, it isn't necessary to tell your sins to a priest, but it's still necessary to tell your sins. As I said standing up in church to confess puts you at the mercy of sinners who, well at least I never did that! The telling of your sins can beat you down to worm status if that's all you do. An honest evaluation of your mixed up good and bad thoughts and deeds is what God is after. God sees you and really wants you to see yourselves.

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The law within condemns, but it also encourages. If you are afraid to look at yourself let Jesus look at you first. When we use the phrase, "it was an inside job," it usually means someone betrayed a trust, pretended to friendship, and endangered innocent people. But salvation is an inside job, betraying the devil within, building trust, bonding in relationship and protecting the innocent.

Closing Prayer: Almighty God, our Redeemer, in our weakness we have failed to be your messengers of forgiveness and hope. Renew us by your Holy Spirit, that we may follow your commands and proclaim your reign of love; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.