Sunday, May 5, 1974
DO WE ALL NEED A KIND OF EXORCISM?
Matthew 4:1-11; Ephesians 6:10-13

What is the nature and power of evil? How do we deal with it? Such questions as these are as old as history and still, they perplex us. Particularly within the past few years there has appeared a strong interest in the question of evil as it is personified in demons, Satan, and assorted phenomena. The book and movie, the Exorcist, is but one example of the renewed interest. Not long ago, Harpers published a new book entitled, “The Reality of the Devil.” And we’ve heard much in recent years about various Satanic cults and even a church of Satan.

Many people would probably agree with the observation of the mother in the “Exorcist” when she stated that she was not sure that God existed, but she was sure that Satan does.

If Satan then is still in business, it behooves us to be prepared to greet him with proper respect when we encounter him. For as C.S. Lewis points out in his introduction to the “Screwtape Letters,” “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe and to feel and excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.”

It may incidentally be an exercise in male chauvinism to refer to the Devil as “He.” In many religions that which personifies evil is feminine.

However, we as Christians should not be surprised.at the interest in evil and its various representations and power. The concept of evil and its power and temptations are no stranger to the Bible. Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis are tempted to disobey God. The serpent in that story re-presents the principle of disorder, confusion, chaos, and evil in the universe.

Satan contends directly against that poor suffering servant of God, Job, and tempts King David to take a census. For the rest of the Old Testament, Satan is not called a proper name. There were demons in the Hebrew religion, but they were generally Canaanite gods who worked out in the desert.

In the New Testament Jesus is tempted by Satan — now clearly a demon. Demons are cast out of people who are possessed; he is called “the strong one,” “the evil one,” “the prince,” of this world.

New Testament scholars debate whether frequent New Testament references to Satan are an indication that belief in a personal devil is part of the essence of Christianity. The majority of scholars are inclined to suggest today that the New Testament writers were using the mythological and re-ligious thought of their time to describe the titanic battle in the universe between good and evil and the Christian faith in the ultimate triumph of good.

But arguing whether the devil is a person or not may be quite beside the point, for the more appropriate issue might be whether evil is real and how we deal with it. More specifically, have we solved the mystery of evil?

For an answer. just pay attention to the daily news: hurricanes, tornadoes, airplane crashes, famines, epidemics. But worse is what we human beings do to one another --tribal and ethnic

wars, slavery, racial and religious bigotry, epidemics of assassination, kidnapping, skyjacking and heroin addiction; child abuse and neglect and the list goes on.

And worse still, many persons who do evil are people of moderate goodwill who intend not evil but good. The war in Vietnam — on both sides — was launched for high-minded purposes, and yet turned into a bloodbath from which neither side was able to extricate itself for years. Much of the mess of Watergate was carried out by persons who thought they were seeking the good. Evil comes from mistakes, miscalculations, limitations, ignorance, far more frequently than it comes from malice. If there is a superintelligence guiding the powers of evil, one must say that his strategy is brilliant. Thus, the Apostle Paul warns us to be strong in the Lord that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

Evil and the devil are no stranger to literature outside the Bible. The late and lamented Dr. Georg Faust is only the most famous of the people who have traded their immortal souls to Satan for wealth, power, knowledge, and pleasure.

What can we as Christians believe today? First, we can believe in the reality and power of evil. No one who has lived in recent years or in any period of history can doubt the reality of demonic. We have already mentioned the wars, the tortures and murders, the violence of person against person and the corruption which many times comes from seeking the good with the wrong means.

Furthermore, to take evil seriously is to note the fact that the total evil in the world is often greater than the sum of its parts. And that's part of the whole problem with the book and the movie, the Exorcist.

The Exorcist, particularly the movie version, romanticizes evil in such bizarre terms, making it to hideously ugly that what it presents is an unreal nightmare of three-ring circus evil; evil blown up, noisy, easily visible, and identifiable.

But that's the stuff of fantasy and it fools us. In the real world, and as the Bible describes it, evil is insidious, quiet, slippery, hard to recognize or separate from the good; it is cleverly camouflaged by surface attractiveness and respectability.

And worse still, even while the film exaggerates and romanticizes evil in a fantastic way, it trivializes it. The view of evil presented in the locked bedroom is a child's view; it is the fantasy of a fearful and frustrated person, the gross-out temper tantrum of a bad child who throws things, and hits people and spits on them and does dirty things with its body .and says adult dirty words all within the confines of the bedroom upstairs.

When the child is totally controlled by the devil, her de-pravity is expressed in the form of foul discharge and foul language. But vomit and dirty words are nothing compared with the destructiveness of what is truly evil in the world, the hidden demons, or unrecognizable demons in all of us, the destructive consequences of our habitual apathy, or our unresolved resentment, our selfish lack of love, our cold refusal to be forgiving, our proud insistence on our own rightness and our over-all tendency to become totally exclusive. Those are the demons that worry me, and which need to be continually exorcised from all of us.

Jesus often warned us about the evil that masquerades as the good, the wolf in sheep's clothing. He didn't say — "Beware of demons," he said rather, "Beware of the leaven of the

Pharisees," that is, beware of those people and those forces who seem so self-righteous. Beware of the hidden evil in people we think are so good, including ourselves.

Compared with the consequences of the seemingly respectable adult sins and temptations, the "hard-to-recognize" demons all around us and within us, wha.t happens in the upstairs bedroom of the Exorcist is child's play. I only wish evil all around us were that recognizable and hideous, then most of us would stay away from it and not be tempted by it.

The temptations which Jesus faced and which we face each day are much more subtle. Jesus was tempted to misuse his power. "Turn these stones into bread," said the tempter. Think of all the hungry people you can feed. But Jesus knew that man does not live by bread alone, and that he had other things to accomplish as well. But it was still a powerful temptation — the good mixed in with the evil so that we are fooled.

Exorcist is an obscene film, not mainly because of the gutter language heard no doubt on school playgrounds and even we learn in the President's office. It is obscene because of its simplistic romanticizing of evil as some-thing hideously revolting instead of so insidiously appealing and because of its base affront to human worth and dignity.

If we define evil or demons as narrowly as in the Exorcist, then we are all in danger of not being aware of or on guard against the more unrecognizable demons all, around us and within us — the demons of envy, greed, the lust for power over others, jealously and many more.

These kinds of demons are not driven out with holy water, crucifixes, and proscribed rituals. In fact, the New Testa-ment never uses the word "exorcism" in reference to the work of Jesus. He did not tell his disciples that driving out demons requires a degree in psychiatry or theology. He told them theirs was a failure of faith.

So, our real fear should not be the devil as portrayed in the exorcist. Our fear should be that we may actually welcome other kinds of more subtle demons into our lives and not even be aware they are demons because they are so alluring.

Furthermore, the terror of our time is not just the climb of evil and the interest in it, but the fall of the good. My fear is that we as persons and as a people are losing our fear of God and our feeling for one another. We are called incessantly to worship wealth and taste, with all of our channels of communication advertising a litany of temptations — from a can of spirits that give a person guts to be a grabber, to a can of deodorized demons to cover every part of a body. Idolizers of possessions, we have been possessed by them and left with a shortage of energy and soul.

Far more important than whether the devil is a person is the question of whether hopefulness can be trusted. The mother in the Exorcist who doubted God but not the devil echoes a nearly universal human insight. There is no reason to doubt the existence of evil in the world, but considerable uncertainty about the existence of or at least the durability of good.

Thus, it is important for us as Christians to be reminded that our faith proclaims in the face of considerable evidence to the contrary that good does triumph over evil, love over hatred, life over death, comedy over tragedy.

This does not mean that we are naive about evil and its power. Indeed, the implication in the New Testament is that the mission of Jesus meant more than the eradication of human faults

and failings, more than the proposal of an ideal of conduct, more even than the provision of life. Jesus believed that evil has a supra-human dimension.

Paul expressed this when he wrote that we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

The Temptation story of Jesus takes us beyond the realm of our enticements to break the moral law. It sets the story of Jesus in the context of a decisive battle between light and darkness, between God and what is opposed to God.

In Jesus' life we see the climax of his struggle with evil when he is nailed to a cross, and not only suffers the weight of our evil against God but descends into the hell which is the kingdom of the godforsaken. And it was from the ultimate depths, the nothingness that is the horror that sometimes haunt us, that Jesus came back to h.is disciples.

We cannot face the forces of evil with a shallow and secularized Christianity. Because evil is much more subtle and insidious and hard to deal with and recognize than as portrayed in the Exorcist, we need the power that is offered in the Gospel of One who as Paul said, "discarded the cosmic powers and authorities like a garment and led them captive in his triumphal procession." It is our faith that Christ has cut the nerve of the evil powers. They are still at large in the world, but we are asked to meet them with confidence and unafraid.

Yet this means we all continue to need a kind of exorcism; exorcism from the many kinds of demons. that are always waiting to possess us — the demons of greed, lust for power, envy, despair, and resentment. And we are always tempted to use the weapons of evil to cast out evil.

Furthermore, just because we have been rid of some of these demons does not mean we are now safe. Jesus warned that once one or two of our demons are gone, seven more may come in to take their place and we may be worse off than before. We are most vulnerable when we think we are the safest.

So, Paul advises us to "be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand the wiles of the devil."

God has given us the power to overcome and to stand. What else should a church be but a place where something of this cosmic confidence explodes in our spirits and we strengthen one another in the battle. Amen.