

“In Over Our Heads”
January 11, 2026

Matthew 3:13-16
Matthew 12:43-45

We don’t talk a lot about demons in this sophisticated congregation surrounded by a major university. Texts like the one we heard this morning are rarely read in our worship. On Reformation Sunday we might sing “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” with Luther’s words describing “this world with devils filled,” though, unlike Luther, none of us are living like that’s actually the case. Nor am I suggesting we should.

But Jesus did talk about demons—or “unclean spirits”—and if we are going to follow in the way of Jesus Christ, it will help us to listen to what he says, even when it sounds strange—perhaps *especially* when what Jesus says sounds strange and disconcerting to our modern ears.

While we no longer see the world as filled with unclean spirits lurking everywhere, the scripture lesson gives us Jesus using ancient ideas and language that speak about ongoing and well-known, current-day realities: “the depth and mystery of evil;” the ways in which evil works in systems and seems greater than ourselves and our actions; “and the fact that a spiritual nature is no safeguard against evil and may indeed issue in the worst forms of evil.”ⁱ

We don’t talk a lot about demons, but we know the evil described with such talk.

It will probably come as no surprise that they don’t talk much about demons at Harvard Divinity School, either. But the late Arthur McGill did just that in the Introduction to Theology class that both Robin and I took in our first semester there all those years ago. I don’t remember much else about that class, but for some reason, what he said struck me then and stuck with me over the decades. It was about the connection between sin and idolatry and the demonic.

Idolatry, of course, is not the worship of statues or other objects—even the worship of money which is so pervasive. The theologian Paul Tillich told us that idolatry makes an “ultimate concern” out of something that is not ultimate. In doing so, it separates us from God, from our neighbors, and from our own true selves. It is in this sense what might be called the “root sin,” the source of all that results in alienation.

And, of course, Calvin told us that the human mind is a factory of idols. And that factory seems to be in operation around the clock.

When we make an idol of something that is not God, we give that object or that idea or that individual a “demonic power”—it can destroy those who give it allegiance. So, at the Divinity School, McGill warned us of the great danger that pushes even good things toward extremes, turning them into demonic forces of destruction.

Reinhold Niebuhr showed us how this process worked with patriotism. He pointed out a paradox that turned individual unselfishness into national egoism. While “loyalty to the nation is a high form of altruism,” Niebuhr saw that at its extreme, the good of patriotism can almost completely destroy an individual’s critical attitude toward the nation. This becomes “the basis of the nation’s power and of the freedom to use the power without moral restraint.”ⁱⁱ

Hear that again: Pushed to its demonic extreme, patriotism allows a nation “the freedom to use power without moral restraint.”

It was early last week when I went looking for those words of Niebuhr. So, I was especially surprised to hear when, last Wednesday, interviewers from *The New York Times* asked the president if there were any limits on his global powers. He said: “Yeah, there is one thing. My own morality. My own mind. It’s the only thing that can stop me...I don’t need international law.”

Here we are as a nation, reaching the demonic limits of patriotism: “The freedom to use power without moral restraint.”

Eight days ago, we awoke to learn that our nation had invaded Venezuela, seized its corrupt president and first lady, and brought them to the United States for trial. Our own president spontaneously announced that we would “run” the country. Over the ensuing days, we’ve been hearing some of what that might mean although it feels as though the administration is making it up as it goes. In the middle of last week, he told us that we’d be getting some 30-50 million barrels of oil from Venezuela that would be under his control.

What could go wrong?

Cuba and Columbia and Mexico have been threatened. Greenland is once again a part of the conversation about what countries should be part of the United States. Russia, with its ongoing assault on Ukraine, China, with its ramped up military exercises near Taiwan are both looking closely at what is happening.

What could go wrong?

Some tell us that the US had good reason to depose Maduro. He was, after all, a corrupt man who stole the election and ruled ruthlessly.

At the same time, this seems to be another step in the unraveling of the post-war world and a return to the once rejected might-makes-right ethos.

Which brings us back to demons and the demonic power that is being unleashed.

Whatever good that might have led to the invasion of Venezuela, that good seems to be moving quickly into forces of destruction and chaos. Valid concern for our nation’s well-being slides into uncontrolled adventurism and global instability.

This unfortunately is nothing new. Our nation does not have a positive record of military interventions on other nations. Things often seem to go well at the start. But as Stephen Kinzer, who teaches at Brown said recently: “There’s an extreme dearth of successful examples of a nation building after violent intervention. When you violently interfere in the affairs of another country, you’re doing something like releasing a wheel from the top of a hill. You can let it go, but you have very little control over how it bounces or where it ultimately ends up. So, one of the concerns that comes up during all of these interventions is the day after. And that day after can extend for years, as we learned in Iraq and Afghanistan.”ⁱⁱⁱ

As the wheel rolls down the hill, we hear in the words of Jesus a warning for our own time: Casting out one demon may result in a clean space for a time. But nature abhors a vacuum. A clean space needs to be filled. And before we know it, even more demons have returned and our situation is worse than it was originally.

As good and virtuous as we want our actions to be, as good and virtuous as we think our actions are, there are always unintended consequences, often quite unvirtuous. They happen especially when we don't know what we're doing. They happen especially when we disregard the advice of Jesus and fail to count the cost of a venture before engaging in it. They are happening globally and they are happening across our nation.

What could go wrong?

Much.

And this brings us around to that story of the baptism of Jesus.

It begins with John appearing in the wilderness around the Jordan River. And that story meets us in the wilderness as well.

The wilderness is the dry country that the unclean spirit of the parable traversed. The wilderness is a time and place of trial. The wilderness is the place where the heavens seem closed. The wilderness is the time when we know affliction. Those times when you pray and find no answer are times in the wilderness. When you face difficult choices with no good options you are staring at the desert places of life.

In the wasteland, John dares to speak a word of good news. And in a sense good news can only be spoken and heard when we stand in the waste places and realize that life is not perfect,

that we are not the good people we want to think we are,

that our nation is not the nation we want to think it is,

that there is such a thing as "sin" separating us from all that gives life and makes life good.

Good news can only be heard when we go to those places where people are hungry, poor, and broken, those places where the threats and the guns of war sound loudly, where the strong seek to defeat the weak. In such places we join in the struggle for life.

So, it should not surprise us to find John and Jesus in a place of forsakenness and foreboding.

John begins his good news with a call that turns us toward the future.

"Repent," he tells the crowds who come out to see him. Turn in a new direction. Turn from the ways that have led to dead ends in your life. Turn from the strife and the bitterness and the hatred that are killing others and you.

Repentance is a call to *turn toward* the new life that God always makes possible. It is the call to engage in the dangerous and skillful work of protecting our neighbors and making peace; it is the call to recognize and cherish the image of God in each human being; it is the call to the nearly

impossible work of loving our enemies. It is a call to fill the clean and empty places with a love that is stronger than death.

Not everyone hears such a call.

Not everyone responds to such a call.

But this is the call that comes even to us today.

A word is shouted into the wilderness filling it so that it is not left empty.

This is where the story of Jesus' baptism begins to inform our lives in these days.

As Matthew pictures that event, he seems to remember the words of the prophet Isaiah—Jesus is the servant of God, the chosen One in whom God delights who will bring forth justice to the nations. In Jesus, God is doing a new thing.

The fuller picture of the new thing that God is doing in Jesus will become clear only as he lives out his life and his calling—bringing healing to broken people, speaking words of peace and comfort as well as words of challenge, confronting authorities and powers that would destroy, even at the cost of his own life.

So too, the meaning of our life is only made clear as we live through the times that we have been given, moving toward the goals that call us forward.

In times of danger, in times of chaos, in *these times*, we remember our baptism. We remember that we have already been in over our heads. We remember that the waters of death have overwhelmed us. We remember that God who is greater than the waters of chaos has reached out and saved us.

We remember that if baptism is about death, even more it is about resurrection and the new life that God makes possible, the new life that God offers to each of us, to all of us. We find ourselves forgiven—offered once again the chance to begin anew—not because of what we have done, but simply because of God's grace, always and only because of God's grace.

In our baptism we have been in over our heads. We came through it by God's grace.

And so, we are offered courage needed for the days ahead. The evil we see all around, the evil that we participate in, is not the ultimate reality. We are given a word of peace to speak into the wilderness of violence. We are given a word of love to speak into the great wilderness of hatred that grows all around us.

As we speak and as we act, we, too, might yet see the heavens open and the Spirit of God descend once more.

ⁱ John McQuarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, pg. 238.

ⁱⁱ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, pg. 91.

ⁱⁱⁱ "What Does US History Tell Us About What's Happening in Venezuela?" NPR Morning Edition, January 7, 2026. <https://www.interlochenpublicradio.org/2026-01-07/what-does-u-s-history-tell-us-about-whats-unfolding-in-venezuela>

