The propers for today are filled with great stuff and awful stuff.

Great that we’re gathered together all over the world by God’s Holy Spirit. And that we’re called to show forth God’s power.

Awful that all the people—all the *peoples*—do not seem to include everyone. Not the Amorites, that’s for sure. God drove them out of the land. Not the unrighteous—they get rooted out. Indeed, only those who trust in God will not be punished.

Great that God gives us this terrific wardrobe—armor, actually—to, what? Stand against rulers and authorities (who, apparently, are part of the cosmic powers of darkness) and forces of evil?

Awful that we humans have so liberally interpreted exactly who those powers are, that we have used the sword of the Spirit at times in the most hateful ways. And later repented of that.

Great that Paul and Jesus have declared that it is the Spirit who gives life.

Awful that Paul, at least sometimes, vilifies the flesh as worse than useless (the term Jesus himself uses in today’s gospel).

In my possibly eccentric view there’s much more greatness and awfulness here.

I know. I *do* know—all of it is what we call “the word of the Lord,” so where do I get off with that “awful” business? Maybe I don’t get off anywhere. Maybe my job is to say that it’s *all* great or wonderful.

Well, I certainly don’t have any quibble with Paul’s request of his audience, and am happy to make it my own: “Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel.” It would seem that he, too, was stymied at times, albeit in different ways than I am, about the dictates of our faith. It’s that “mystery of the gospel” bit—meaning of course the mystery of the good news—that challenges us preachers and us Christians in general.

There are people who do bad, despicable, unspeakable things in this world. Our challenge (that word again) is to see them all as children of God first of all. That applies to the troublesome folks close to home who have the nerve to disagree with our opinions. Though most of us think, like Peter Schickele in PDQ Bach’s “The Seasonings,” “You can’t have opinions about the truth.” It applies to members of misogynistic, murderous regimes halfway across the world. Those damned Amorites! I didn’t bother to look up the Amorites, nor do I remember anything about them from my studies nor from having read these passages over the past fifty years. And I’m not apologizing for that. For the moment I feel like I know as much as I need to for my purposes today: they were the bad guys, the Taliban, the Nazis, of their day. It felt as good to hate them and vilify them and smugly proclaim God’s vengeance on them as it does to say that about . . . [long pause] . . . fill in the blank for yourself . . . today.

We love to do that. Always have, I suppose.

Jesus used these folks (the despised ones) deliberately either as examples of good, godly behavior or simply as fellow human beings despite their marginalized or outcast position in society. Here’s a short list of the ones that were recorded for us:

* Head of the list, of course, and an intentional choice in a made-up story, or parable, is the good Samaritan. Practically an oxymoron for the faithful Jews whom Jesus addressed: “Good Samaritan, indeed,” they might have thought.
* Then, in real-life situations, his encounters with these folks, sometimes just talking with them (scandalous in itself), even touching them:

Women—in general—including a Samaritan woman (double whammy), an unclean woman, and so on.

The prodigal, thankless, son.

Tax collectors (and others who collaborated with the occupying force, the Romans.

The Romans themselves.

At least one demon-possessed man.

The poor in general.

Lepers.

Gentiles, again, generally.

The point is that Jesus didn’t seem to buy into “except for this group” or “those are the evil ones” type of rhetoric.

He called Herod a fox. (Woooo!) About Judas he expressed sorrow instead of threats of retribution. He asked God to forgive those who nailed him to a cross.

There are individuals who cannot—should not—be allowed to circulate among the population at large. There are people I myself choose to avoid. All of them—all of us—are children of God.

We pray in today’s Collect that God will show forth divine power through the church (us) among all peoples.

There are a couple of lines in the reading from Joshua that, to my ear, are echoed in the one from John. Joshua says about choosing among the ancestral gods “As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” And the people around him say, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods.” That’s the line echoed for me when Peter exclaims, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

I began by talking about the great and the awful in today’s readings. Or the wonderful and the terrible, if you prefer. Well, we’re stuck with all of it, aren’t we? Reflecting on it now, about the best I can do is to say that Holy Scripture provides us with proof that we humans have always struggled with needing to categorize some people as evil or less than human, or something other than God’s children.

The shining light in all of this is the One around whom our faith is formed, the One whom we believe to have embodied in his person the one, loving, creator God. There is power in that, power not to *vanquish* our foes (or those we identify as such), but to change their hearts and ours, to cooperate in God’s ongoing creation of love and peace.

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