

Shut the Door, Keep out the Devil

Sermon for Ash Wednesday, March 6, 2019

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Have you ever heard of him? The old devil—Satan himself—Old Scratch! The last moniker is likely Middle English *scrat*, the name of a demon or goblin. “Get behind me, Satan,” said Jesus. During Lent, we do what Jesus said. We shut the door and make ourselves a solitary place to be with God. The outcome is our distancing ourselves from the forces that resist the new kingdom while pondering its power and presence in our hearts. Maybe you know this Christian song to sing along. We can arrange it as we go if Thomas, the choir and Levi will help us out. The chorus is simple and that is all you need to know for the

*Oh, Satan is an evil charmer (shut the door, keep out
The devil)*

*He's hungry for a soul to hurt (shut the door, keep the
Devil in the night)*

*And without your holy armor (shut the door, keep out
The devil)*

*He will eat you for dessert (shut the door, keep the
Devil in the night)*

Chorus

Shut the door, keep out the devil,

Shut the door, keep the devil in the night

Shut the door, keep out the devil

Everything is going to be all right.

*My mama used to sing this song (shut the door, keep out
The devil)*

*Poppa used to sing it, too (shut the door, keep the
Devil in the night)*

*Jesus called and took them home (shut the door, keep
Out the devil)*

*And so I sing the song for you (shut the door, keep the
Devil in the night)*

Those lyrics weren't written as a Caribbean tune. They are not of African-American origin. They were composed in 1982 by a White American singer/songwriter Randy Stonehill who is from California.¹

The lyrics here, as the etymology of the song reports, are pure CCM, (contemporary Christian music) but the catchy calypso lilt and the good humor and musical playfulness lifts the song to another level. It reminds me, the speaker said, of my favorite story about the Devil, one told by Tony Campolo: An old preacher wakes in the night and hears a noise. He turns on the light as sees Satan, the devil himself, standing at the foot of his bed. "Oh," says the preacher, "it's just you." And he turns off the light and goes back to sleep."²

Old Scratch or **Mr. Scratch** is a nickname or pseudonym for the Devil. The name likely continues Middle English *scrat*, the name of a demon or goblin, derived from Old Norse *skratte*.^[1]

Old Scratch appears in so many forms in our culture. The story of the Devil and Daniel Webster illustrates. Farmer Jabez Stone, from the small town of Cross Corners, New Hampshire, is plagued with unending bad luck, causing him to finally swear "it's enough to make a man want to sell his soul to the devil!" Stone is visited the next day by a stranger, who later identifies himself as "Mr. Scratch", and makes such an offer in exchange for seven years of prosperity. Stone agrees.

After seven years, Mr. Scratch comes for Stone's soul. Stone bargains for an additional three years; after the additional three years passes, Mr. Scratch refuses any further extension. Wanting out of the deal, Stone convinces famous lawyer and orator Daniel Webster to accept his case.

At midnight of the appointed date, Mr. Scratch arrives and is greeted by Webster, presenting himself as Stone's attorney. Mr. Scratch tells Webster, "I shall call upon

¹ <http://pancocojams.blogspot.com/2014/01/a-cultural-crtique-of-song-shut-de-door.html> (accessed March 6, 2019).

you, as a law-abiding citizen, to assist me in taking possession of my property," and so begins the argument. It goes poorly for Webster, since the signature and the contract are clear and Mr. Scratch will not compromise.

You can read the rest of the story to find out who won the case. Thankfully, in our faith journey, we already know what happens to the devil. The devil—diabolos—in the Greek represents the element of the demonic in the world. Is there a character like the folkloric “Old Scratch” for each of us to contend with. The answer is clear. As Paul would remind us, that Jesus has conquered all the anxieties of life that we bear all of our lives: sin, death, hell, and the grave. Each of those were overcome on the cross. And so, like the old preacher, we the light of our rooms are flooded with the sense of the darkness and fear of our mortal selves, we have but to say with all earnestness to our greatest fears of all—“Oh, it’s just you. And so then, we can turn off the light and go back to sleep.

The door is shut and the devil is left in the night!