

Things That Go Bump In The Night

Wedgewood Baptist Church, Charlotte, North Carolina

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Lessons: 1 Samuel 28:1-25; Matthew 14:22-26

There's a far side cartoon showing two ghost mothers surrounded by a herd of ghost children behaving like regular children with too much sugar coursing through them. One mother says to the other: You know, Edith, Billy is having trouble in school... Sally's always having some sort of crisis... I tell you, Edith, it's not easy raising the dead.

As soon as King Saul passed a law against witchcraft and drove all practitioners out of the land, the Witch of Endor traded in her broomstick [for] a bicycle, changed her pointed black hat for a summer straw, [dyed her cat a blond sort of tabby], flushed a great many ... [smoking] concoctions down the john, and tried to go straight." (adapted from Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*, p. 173)

Witches have had a bad time of it at the hands of the church according to the vicissitudes of ignorance. We distrust what we don't understand, no matter what it is. We have no patience for anything that is very much different than we are.

We seem to enjoy persecuting folks for having different religious rituals from ours: circumcision, masses, peyote use, rosaries, and certainly goddess worship. We assume that the tales about witches we are told while roasting marshmallows are true. And we condemn witches without trials and without understanding.

The Witch of Endor (should we call her "Endora"?) knew all of this, even back in her day thousands of years ago. The supernatural is only trusted if it is our supernatural. And so, she laid low, giving up the public expression of her particular faith, if you will, for fear of persecution at Saul's command.

And then Saul also fell on hard times. Saul was desperate. He had lost religious power and felt completely forsaken by God. He was convinced that David was after the throne and was so paranoid as a result that he persuaded himself that Jonathan had turned against him as well. The Philistines were looking for a rumble and Saul was grasping at the increasingly frayed end of his weakening rope.

Saul wanted to know how things turned out before he acted. He had a pretty good idea of his chances but he wasn't quite rational and didn't think it was a good idea to trust his own judgement. Samuel was dead, but Saul was pretty sure what Samuel would have said anyway. Saul was indeed paranoid but that didn't alter that fact that Samuel didn't like him. In Saul's opinion, at least, he and Yahweh weren't on speaking terms at the moment. No dreams, no voices, no prophecies. Without any stockbrokers in ancient Israel, Saul had few options for trading futures.

And so he turned to the unknown. He specifically asks for a woman who could call up the dead. Immediately his servants know who to recommend. There's a woman in Endor who served three terms as President of the Wizards and Wiccan Local # 493. Her reputation was in for a big boost with Saul on the way.

When he goes, he tries to deceive her. It seems only fair as he is trying to deceive himself as well. But she is not hoodwinked -- or at least not for long. She knows what is legal and what isn't and accuses her customer of trying to trap her into committing what was a capital offense. When she realizes that it is Saul, himself, at her table, she is even more frightened.

But Saul has sworn by Yahweh that no harm will come to her and she continues her rather vague augury describing some sort of being rising from the ground wrapped in a robe. She doesn't name the apparition but Saul's tormented conscience takes over where her specificity fails.

It must be Samuel. Why Saul would have summoned Samuel, I cannot tell you. Perhaps because Saul already knew what the answers were. Perhaps because Saul knew what Samuel would have said. And in his confusion, Saul hears Samuel's voice, groggy and complaining, "Why have you disturbed me?" Saul cries out in terror of his situation and the Philistines imminent attack. "God has turned away from me and answers me no more, so I have summoned you to tell me what I should do."

But Samuel's shade is not sympathetic, perhaps annoyed at being roused out of a comfy apartment in Sheol. If God doesn't speak to you then you've wasted your time summoning me," Samuel says. "I operate only as God's spokesperson." Samuel indulges in a little bit of "I told you so" and adds merely that Saul will meet his death on the morrow. And that is the last we hear from the late great prophet, Samuel.

Saul, however, lacks the grace and naivete of Brutus when Brutus was confronted by Caesar's ghost. Saul, confronted by the ghost of Samuel, passes out full length on the floor. Talk about unpresidential behavior. The woman's behavior belies the bad rep. of witches, however. She shifts roles from conjurer to caregiver. She sees that the king is terrified and weak and at long last gives him and his entourage nourishment from her meager store. The Witch of Endor, in fact, is a rather admirable character in many ways, at least in her care for the potentially troublesome king.

The story of God's relationship with humankind as recorded in scripture is a story of the supernatural. Quite simply, God is without nature, above nature, the creator of what we call nature, and therefore, "Supernatural." To call witchcraft or visions or even salvation "supernatural" merely names the phenomena -- it does not explain them.

Take the gospel story for today, for example. Jesus had just finished feeding thousands of folks and sent the disciples away across the lake. In the middle of a fierce storm, they look out into the sea and immediately assume that they have seen a ghost. Jesus says, "It is I, be not afraid." But whatever name we give the vision: ghost, paranormal phenomena, psychokinetic anomaly, or miracle -- there is no escaping that it is a supernatural occurrence, happening outside the realm of nature as we know it.

And the disciples react, I suggest, exactly as we would have. They are scared out of their wits by what they cannot explain, what they do not understand. We react the same today -- to things both natural and supernatural. But are not all things within the realm of God's power?

The witch of Endor, demonized, outlawed, feared, could easily have been a scapegoat for Saul in his despair. And millions of fundamentalists the world over somehow still read into her story that she was responsible for Saul's downfall. You should read some of the tripe that passes for commentary on this passage. And the poor, stupid disciples immediately assume they see a ghost walking towards them on the water and are scared witless (if that was, in fact, possible for them).

I suggest to you that we need fear witches and ghosts only to the extent that we believe in personified evil that rivals the power of God. If we believe in one omnipotent God, then we need not fear evil pretenders to the divine throne. Within ourselves and in the systems we have created there is a battle between good and evil. We create a devil to scapegoat. We use demons to avoid responsibility for the evil we either create, facilitate or, at least, ignore. We gratefully fall back on the old standby: "The Devil made me do it." But on a cosmic scale, let me put your mind at ease: there is no contest because there is no opponent. God, or whatever appellation we use, alone rules God's own creation.

There is an old Celtic prayer that goes: "From ghoulies and ghosties and long legged beasties and things that go bump in the night, dear Lord, deliver us." But the Witch of Endor summons the prophet of Yahweh and the ghost on the water is the Redeemer of all and the thing that goes bump in the night might well be God, disturbing our rest and calling us out into the strange and uncomfortable.

So some of us, maybe most of us, will continue to pray, "From things that go bump in the night, dear Lord, deliver us," because we wish to be delivered from God's often unwelcome interference with our comfortable status quo and God's frequently annoying call to action on behalf of the Realm of God.

But maybe -- just maybe, once in a while, we'll find the courage to pray, "From the fear of ghoulies and ghosties and long legged beasties and things that go bump in the night, dear Lord, deliver us."

And maybe -- God will deliver us from that fear.

And maybe, just maybe -- we will brave the prophet's words and walk the treacherous seas to serve the God we love.

AMEN.

Questions to consider about the sermon:

1. What do you know about witches, good or bad?

2. Would you be willing to get to know one?
3. Saul embraced what he had publicly condemned. Do we practice what we preach? What are the ethical obligations of those who "make up the rules" (i.e., the religious establishment).
4. We often condemn what we do not understand, especially in the religious community. What are some practices you condemn but do not fully understand?
5. What do you think was the presence and importance of sorcery or witchcraft in lives of the Hebrew people? Why do you think that when Saul requested a person to act as a medium, his servants knew where to find one?
6. Why did Saul specifically request a woman?