

Welcome!

May the grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, be with you. Thank you all for downloading and reading this message. We want our church to be a safe place for you to know and experience God’s love and grace. If we can help you on the next step of your spiritual journey, please contact us at (951) 737-5225 or via email at coronaumc@aol.com.

May the peace of the Lord be with you,
Pastor Eric

Message: Darkness Before the Light

Do you know who David Berkowitz is?

Anyone born after 1965 has probably never heard of him. David Berkowitz was the serial killer known as the “Son of Sam.” He killed six people and wounded seven others in a series of attacks in New York City in 1976. Berkowitz used to leave letters taunting the police. One of them read: “I say goodbye and goodnight. Police: let me haunt you with these words. I’ll be back! I’ll be back! To be interpreted as – bang, bang, bang, bang – ugh!! Yours in murder, Mr. Monster.”¹ That’s a real nightmare. Berkowitz was caught in 1977, sentenced to six life sentences (365 years) and eventually died in prison.

Berkowitz’s life was out of control from the time he was a child. In his own words, “I was like a wild and destructive animal. My mother had no control over me. My father had to pin me to the floor until I calmed down.”² He often thought of suicide and would sit on the window ledge of the sixth floor building they lived in. When Berkowitz was 14, his mother died of cancer. His only source of stability was gone. David joined the Army, but it didn’t help and he was out after three years.

In 1975, Berkowitz met some people at a party who were heavily involved in the occult. He’d always been fascinated with witchcraft, Satanism and the occult. He’d watched countless horror and Satan-related movies as a child, which totally captivated his mind. Now 22, the forces of Satan were more evident in Berkowitz’s life. He felt “as if something was trying to take control of my life.”³ He began to read the Satanic Bible and to practice occult rituals and incantations.

Berkowitz later wrote, “I am utterly convinced that something satanic had entered into my mind and, looking back at all that happened, I realize that I had been slowly deceived. I did not know that bad things were going to result from all this, yet over the months the things that were wicked no longer seemed to be such. I was headed down the road to destruction and I did not know it. Maybe I was at a point where I just

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Berkowitz

² http://www.scionofzion.com/son_of_hope.htm

³ *Ibid*

didn't care.”⁴ Eventually, he crossed an invisible line of no return. He called himself the “Son of Sam,” a reference to Samhain, which is a name for Satan. Because of his horrible crimes, people lost their lives, others suffered and they will for the rest of their lives.

But there’s a part of the story you may not know. David Berkowitz is also called the “Son of Hope.” Ten years into his prison sentence at Attica, an inmate came up to Berkowitz in the prison yard one evening. He introduced himself as Rick and told David Jesus Christ loved him and wanted to forgive him. David mocked him because he didn’t think that God would ever forgive him or want anything to do with him. But Rick was persistent and the two eventually became friends. They would walk in the prison yard together.

Little by little Rick shared his life and faith. He kept reminding David that no matter what a person did, Christ was ready to forgive if that individual would turn from the bad things they were doing and put their full faith and trust in Jesus Christ and what he did on the cross – dying for our sins. Rick gave David a Gideon Pocket Testament and asked him to read the Psalms. Surprisingly, David did so every night.

One night in 1987 David read Psalm 34:6, *“This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles.”* That’s when the dam broke. He began to pour his heart out to God. David later said, “Everything seemed to hit me at once - the guilt of what I had done and the disgust at what I had become. Late that night in my cold cell I got down on my knees and began to cry to Jesus Christ. I told Him that I was sick and tired of doing evil. I asked Jesus to forgive me for all my sins. I spent a good while on my knees praying to Him. When I got up it felt as if a heavy but invisible chain that had been around me for so many years was broken. A peace flooded over me. I did not understand what was happening. In my heart I just knew that somehow my life was going to be different.”⁵ Mr. Monster was gone.

David’s story is hard for some people to hear, particularly those who were impacted by the cruel acts he did when he was young. “In the eleven years after he was saved, David began to do good work.

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ *Ibid*

God opened doors for him to start an outreach ministry in prison. He worked with men with emotional and coping problems. David would give them Bibles, read with them and pray with them. His hope was to share brotherly love and compassion. He became the prison chaplain’s clerk and started a letter writing ministry. David was able to share his story with millions of people on TV programs like Inside Edition.”⁶ One of David’s favorite Scripture passages was Romans 10:13, “*Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.*”

David Berkowitz wants us to know that the God who miraculously transformed the “Son of Sam” into the “Son of Hope” can make the same kind of transformation in our heart and life today.

We’re a week away from Halloween activities. It’s a time of year that’s important to us to recognize and understand. I want to spend a few minutes this morning looking at what the Bible tells about how we should view the occult. Rest assured, I’m not going to tell you to take down the decorations or hide the pumpkins in case pastor comes to visit!

First of all, let’s get one thing clear. There is no such thing as goblins, zombies, vampires, werewolves, Frankenstein’s monster or the creature from the Black Lagoon (that’s a reach!) These are fictional characters created by novelists and dramatized by Hollywood producers, directors and actors. There may be some unfortunate individuals with diseases and illnesses that were the original source of the myths, but there is no undead horde ready to take over the world anytime soon. The closest you get to zombies in the Bible is the valley of dry bones in the 22nd chapter of the book of Numbers. However, the story is an allegory. That means it’s an illustration. The story isn’t about undead or zombies. It’s about God’s power over the natural world.

Second, let’s look at what the Bible says about ghosts, spirits and our relationship to them. There is a spiritual realm. That’s what heaven is. Spirits appear many places in the Bible, beginning with Genesis 1:1-2, “*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the spirit of God swept over the face of the waters.*” God the

⁶ *Ibid*

Creator with the Holy Spirit did a good work. The result was the universe as we know it.

Yet we don't have to wait very long before evil appears. Genesis 3:13-15 show us, *“The LORD God said to the woman, ‘What is this that you have done?’ The woman said, ‘The serpent tricked me, and I ate.’ The LORD God said to the serpent, ‘Because you have done this, cursed are you I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.’”* Satan (the serpent) influences humanity, causing us to turn away from God. By doing so, we turn away from what is good, what is wholesome and what is healthy. Rather than living up to our full potential as children made in the image of God, we distort the image. We lose our understanding, peace, love, righteousness and holiness.

Sadly, we're lost when we turn away from God. We become isolated, alone and afraid, separated from God. As a result, many people turn to other gods. Some of our modern day gods are success, consumerism, hedonism and individualism. Some of us try to find alternate ways to access the spiritual world. We visit seers and dabble in the occult. The prophet Isaiah gives us a warning: *“Now if people say to you, ‘Consult the ghosts and the familiar spirits that chirp and mutter; should not a people consult their gods, the dead on behalf of the living, for teaching and for instruction?’ surely, those who speak like this will have no dawn!”* (Isaiah 8:19-20). Those who have no dawn are those who don't see the light. They're living in darkness. That's unhealthy – spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically.

We need to take care. Matthew 5:18-20a says, *“What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person.”* We certainly know that's lived out in people's lives. We hear too many stories of violent crime each and every day perpetrated by lost souls.

Okay, but everyone celebrates Halloween. The kids have programs. All their friends are doing it. What should we do? While there is some of the “if all your friends were going to jump off a bridge, would you do that?” moral to this, let's look at the Bible first. We should also consider

what other churches are doing and our own experience – individually and as a congregation. Then we can use our God-given reason to decide.

Here are some helpful passages to consider:

“Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

“Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions” (Romans 14:1).

“... our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12).

Above all, if you’re confused or uncertain about what to do, hold on to these promises:

“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3:17).

“Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:57). The result is never in doubt ...

“War broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world - he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him” (Rev. 12:7-9).

“... in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:37-39).

Don’t be afraid. The victory is already won. Rather than competing with Halloween, I have a suggestion: let’s spend time reading our children Bible stories during the week and teaching them to pray. The best protection we can offer is God’s love. That’s how we can all become sons and daughters of Abraham, children of hope and promise.

Psalm 65:1-8 (NRSV)

Praise is due to you,

O God, in Zion;

and to you shall vows be performed,

O you who answer prayer!

To you all flesh shall come.

When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us,
you forgive our transgressions.

Happy are those whom you choose and bring near
to live in your courts.

We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house,
your holy temple.

By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance,
O God of our salvation;

you are the hope of all the ends of the earth
and of the farthest seas.

By your strength you established the mountains;
you are girded with might.

You silence the roaring of the seas,
the roaring of their waves,
the tumult of the peoples.

Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs;
you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy.

Luke 18:9-14 (NRSV)

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”