

“What about the Devil?”

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”

By the Reverend. Joanna Adams
Morningside Presbyterian Church
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Today, I begin a series of sermons that will run throughout the five Sundays in Lent. For Christians, Lent is the season of the year customarily used for deeper reflection and self-discipline. I want to suggest to you that coming to worship on a regular basis during the weeks ahead and thinking with me about some of the most perplexing questions we can ask about faith and life are spiritual disciplines might be important for you this year. Each sermon in the series will be based on the assigned Biblical text for the day. The sermons in the weeks ahead will be as follows:

“Is Jesus the Way to Salvation?”

“Where Is God When Terrible Things Happen?”

“Should I Believe in Miracles?”

“Is There Life After Death?”

I look forward to exploring these questions with you.

As serious as the season is, I can not resist sharing with you something that a Presbyterian friend e-mailed to me recently. These are quotations church bulletins and newsletters.

“The sermon this morning,” one bulletin read, “is ‘Jesus Walks on Water.’”

The sermon for the evening service will be ‘Searching for Jesus.’”

“The pastor will preach his farewell message next Sunday after which the choir will sing ‘Break Forth into Joy.’”

“Susan remains in the hospital and needs blood donors for more transfusions. She is also having trouble sleeping and requests tapes of Pastor Jack’s sermons.”

This morning the subject is Satan or the devil or whatever you want to call the one who tempted Jesus in the wilderness at the very beginning of his ministry, just after the glorious occasion of his baptism, when the Spirit of God had descended upon him like a dove, and a voice from heaven had said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, the one with whom I am well pleased.” The proximity of the two scenes – the scene in the wilderness and the scene by the river Jordan- is no coincidence. It is true, is it not, that just when things seem to be going most wonderfully and you feel as if finally you have made it to the peak of human existence, you are the most vulnerable? It is then that we, like our Lord, can be tempted to betray our core identity. We are tempted to forget that we are created to be nothing less than but also nothing more than human, and to be

human is to have limits. If Satan was after Jesus Christ in this regard, you can be certain that Satan will be after you. There is no way to live a life in this world and not be subject to the temptation to be less or more than God created you to be.

Whether you believe there was a literal wilderness, whether you believe in a literal devil, or whether you believe that the whole struggle took place "within the mind and soul of Jesus," you and I simply can not deny the reality of the struggle. (1) As Fred Craddock puts it, there is another player on the field. If there were not another player on the field, there would have been no need for the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. If there were no other player on the field, there would have been no reason for him to make and live among us, as one of us, no reason for him to suffer and to die.

I find it to be of enormous comfort to know that the one who was beloved of God, the very Son of God, fully human, fully God- that he was, as the book of Hebrews puts it, "as tested as we are." As vulnerable to temptation as we are. Therefore, he is able "to sympathize with us" in the complexities of human existence. There is much talk about righteousness these days and morality, much piety on parade in American religious culture. There are some that think that the answer to everything that is wrong with human society and with us broken mortals individually is to post the Ten Commandments on the walls of public school classrooms and courthouses. Would that it were as simple as that! The encounter with Jesus and the devil reminds us that temptation masquerades in all kinds of ways. Peter Gomes of Harvard's memorial Church writes, that "Temptation masquerades most cleverly in areas of moral ambiguity where good people can be tempted either to do good things for the wrong reasons, or bad things for a good and high purpose." (2) Would that all we had to do was read the Bible and have everything be made clear. That might be the case, were it not for our capacity for self deception, were it not for the reality of human pride that blinds us to the most unspeakable of our sins. Almost always it is in the name of virtue, "vice is given its greatest aid and comfort. Temptation appeals most particularly to those who would see themselves as good and who would pursue the good as a goal that they themselves are capable on their own of bringing to pass." (3)

Goodness is no shield against temptation. Jesus had plenty of goodness. He was utterly committed to holding on to the good, and it was Jesus that Satan was most interested in.

What came to pass in Jesus' life was that the Spirit of God led him into the wilderness – You can believe in a literal wilderness, or you can believe it as a place of testing. Whether you see it as an actual geographical place or a state of the soul, it is clear that the Spirit of God led Jesus there. Clearly, this moral testing, as difficult as it was, nevertheless was a part of the divine plan. How could Jesus help us be human in the way God intended if he were able to avoid the pain of being human? In the wilderness, he met the devil head on.

I once asked a group of friends at a Chinese restaurant if they believed in the devil. (You have to do your sermon research wherever you can.) One said yes. Two said maybe. The rest looked at me as if they wished I would just eat my egg roll and hush up.

In his great work, "Church Dogmatics," theologian Karl Barth warns against giving the devil more than his due. It is all right to look at the devil, to glance in that direction, but we must not

linger or become engrossed with the subject. "This matter may be real, but it must not be contemplated too long." Many fundamentalist Christians give the devil more than his due. Many liberal Christians never give Satan a thought. I will tell you where I stand on this matter. I do not believe in a literal devil. I do not believe in an actual being called Satan, but I am well aware of the reality that the figure of Satan represents, which is that are forces at work in the world against the purposes of God. We can not defeat them on our own. Only God can defeat them. I believe in what the figure of Satan symbolizes.

The poet Wallace Stevens wrote that the death of Satan in the modern consciousness was a tragedy for the human imagination. I would say that the denial of the existence of the forces of negativism, nihilism, as represented by the literary theological construct called "Satan" has tragic consequences for all human existence. You can not defeat that which you pretend is not there.

Call the devil what you will. The Bible calls him "Satan," "The Tempter," "The Prince of Demons," "Beelzebub," "The Prince of Darkness." Satan appears more often in the New Testament than the Old. In the Book of Job, he walks around the earth spying on people and reporting back to God as to their conduct. Someone has suggested, in fact, that in the Book of Job, Satan is more like a secret intelligence agent than anything else. (4) By the Book of Chronicles, however, Satan has become identified as God's enemy, but, in general, he is infrequently mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is in the Gospels that we begin to see Satan show up regularly. Particularly in Matthew, there is a war going on between the forces of evil and the forces of God, as represented by Jesus Christ. Sometimes, stalking in the shadows, sometimes boldly confrontational, Satan is a force to be reckoned with. Jesus has his first encounter with Satan immediately after his baptism.

It is interesting to me that in our Presbyterian baptismal liturgy we now have the option of including what is called "The renunciation of evil." Have we ever included the renunciation at Morningside Presbyterian Church? If someone presents him or herself for baptism or even brings a little bitty baby, the parents are asked this question, "Trusting in God do you turn away from sin and on your child's behalf or your own behalf, do you renounce evil and its powers in the world?" The idea is that if Jesus needed time to get clear about whose side he was on, surely those of us who would follow his way are in similar need. .

It has been years since I watched *The Godfather* movies, but I remember a scene in one of them in which a Corleone baby is being baptized. The camera shifts back and forth from the sanctuary and the font and the baby to scenes of violence and mayhem caused by the Mafia. The realm of God and the realm of the world. There is absolute conflict between the two.

Sometimes I think the first task of those of us who would follow the way of Christ is to acknowledge the massiveness of our denial about the forces that work against the purposes of God. I do not believe that there is a separate, distinct entity whose name is "Satan," but I do believe that what Satan represents out there and in here in my own heart must be reckoned with and acknowledged. If not, I become intellectually naïve and practically useless to the purposes of God.

Let me say a few things about Satan. First, God and Satan are never equal adversaries. “We trust in one God, the Holy One of Israel, who alone we worship and serve.” (5) The scriptural motif of Satan’s being a fallen angel is our way of helping us understand that everything exists through the grace of God. Even that which is evil has no independent existence on its own but is the result of the fallenness of creation.

God made the world good and saw that it was good and declared it to be good but then came the scene that was read from the book of Genesis this morning. Adam, Eve, the serpent. Adam and Eve are not content to be human as God made them. They want to be more than human, to be without limits, to be as God. And then the snake, the serpent comes. The serpent makes a lot of sense, doesn’t he? “Don’t worry about eating the apple! It’s not going to hurt you!”

This leads me to the second thing I would say about temper. He almost always appears in a winsome, appealing and reasonable form. Satan offers you something. It makes no sense to refuse. Mesostophiles made a lot of sense to Dr. Faustus. Certainly, Satan, as he tempted Jesus, made a lot of sense. What’s the matter with turning a few stones into bread if you’re hungry? What is wrong with being a little spectacular now and then and diving off the pinnacle of the temple especially if you have been promised you will not hurt yourself? And what’s wrong with ruling the world, if you think you will be good at it? Satan says, “Stop being so preoccupied with God. Please yourself. Satisfaction, fame, power, it can all be yours.” It all makes a lot of sense until you stop to count the cost. The cost is your soul. The cost is your very identity.

And where did Satan come from? What is the source of the power of darkness? There has been much debate across the centuries and little consensus, but I am helped in this bewildering matter by an excellent Biblical scholar named, Walter Wink, who suggests that we not focus on the idea of the fallen angel or that we see evil as the mysterious force that appears from another realm—either up in heaven or from below in hell. He maintains that the spirit of negativity which Satan represents does not come from outside of human existence but is a part of who we are. It is a part of the systems and structures that compose human society. This spirit is here all the time, and it emerges when we betray our vocation of obedience to God. Wink uses the excellent of a soccer match. When a riot breaks out at a soccer match, and people trample one another to death, where does that come from? Has the riot demon leaped down from heaven or up from hell? Or is there something intrinsic in the situation that suddenly becomes crystallized? (6) Think of those things that rip at the fabric of human dignity and human society. Think of homophobia. Where does that come from? Another realm? Think of anti-Semitism. Does that not rise up from the inherently negative forces that threaten to overtake us at all times? These negative forces are not visited upon us from the outside; they emerge from the brokenness within.

And in your life and mine, wouldn’t it be wonderful if you could say, “I don’t know what got over me. The devil made me do it. I am not responsible for the hurt I caused.” Nonsense. There is within us a God given capacity of free will. If there is any troubling trend in our modern society to me it is the unwillingness of virtually anybody to take responsibility for anything. It is time for us to acknowledge that we all are created to be responsible, moral agents and that every one of us, with God’s help, can move to higher ground and make the better choice. The conversation between Jesus and his tempter is a conversation we hear in our own

hearts. Everyday we chose whether we will act according to our higher or our baser instincts. Everyday we decide which team is going to take the field. Jesus shows us that the devil can be beaten and overcome and outwitted. Jesus did it by holding fast to the best he knew, the promises of God. In every instance of temptation, he turned to his tradition:

“One shall not live by bread alone”

“Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.”

I think this is a great time to remember how important Sunday School is. How can you have the resources of your faith to turn to, how can our children grow up to be active, moral agents if they do not know their tradition?

I believe that we get better at this business of temptation over the years, of holding our own against the powers of darkness. The more we make honorable decisions, the more likely we are to make more honorable decisions. The more we choose the good, the more likely we are to choose the good. Sadly, the reverse is all so true. Each act of cowardice, each act of surrender weakens us. There is no time like the present, this first Sunday in Lent, for us to get a grip.

I want to close with a word that has to do with the community. I have talked a great deal about personal temptation, but I want to close with remembering an incident in the history of Atlanta, Georgia. In 1958, fifty sticks of dynamite exploded on a Sunday morning on Peachtree Street and ripped apart the oldest synagogue in Atlanta. A very important book about the synagogue Temple bombing was written by Melissa Faye Greene. In doing her research, she read all the letters that had been written to Rabbi Rothchild as a consequence of that terrible tragedy in our city. There were thousands of letters and telegrams that came to the Temple, one from a black Baptist church, one letter signed by the entire membership of St. Mark’s Methodist Church, hundred and hundreds of personal letters, one on a small piece of notepaper that read, “I am filled with shame for what those people did to your temple.” signed “An Episcopalian.” Inside were three folded dollar bills.

“After reading through those letters,” Greene said, “I began to understand what our city was trying to say. It was a collective stand. ‘Oh, no you don’t!’ the community was saying. ‘Oh, no you don’t. That kind of thing won’t play here. This is a civilized city. We are not going to stand for this.’”

That’s how you fight the devil. In our day, shouldn’t we be standing up and saying similar kinds of things? “Oh, no, you are not going to treat people this way. You are not going to dismiss whole categories of people.”

Who is going to stand up and say, “Oh, no, we are not going to have this vitriolic, political rhetoric. Not in our city. Not in our town!”

Read the Gospel of Matthew and see how our Lord Jesus did it. He did it through the power of love, proving, that is possible to defeat evil without becoming evil. Thanks be to God. Amen.

- (1) Eugene C. Bay, "Temptation," The Bryn Mawr Presbyterian church, Bryn Mawr, PA, March 12, 2000.
- (2) As quoted by Bay.
- (3) Ibid.
- (4) Elaine Pagels, *The Origins of Satan*, Random House, 1995.
- (5) The Brief Statement of Faith, Presbyterian church (USA)
- (6) Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, Augsburg Press, 1992.