

Year A Lent 1  
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7  
Psalm 32  
Romans 5:12-19  
Matthew 4:1-11

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The idea of evil looms large in our readings today, both as a character in the stories, and as the category of “sin.” In the story of Adam and Eve, the evil serpent tempts Eve to sin—to disobey God. In Psalm 32 the narrator groans because of his sins, until he confesses his sins to the Lord, and is forgiven. In his letter to the Romans, Paul explains how Jesus is the New Adam, whose sacrifice saves us from our sins, and from death. And of course, evil is personified as the devil in Matthew’s version of Jesus’s temptation in the wilderness. It’s this last depiction of evil that we’re going to look at this morning, because there are a lot of people who think of the devil as this caricature—a sort of comic book villain with a forked tail who carries a pitchfork. But he’s a lot more subtle than that.

Because we hear a version of Jesus’s temptation in the wilderness every year, we are probably pretty familiar with the plot: Immediately after Jesus’s baptism, the Holy Spirit drives Jesus out into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Jesus fasts for 40 days and 40 nights, echoing several previous holy texts, and then the devil comes to tempt him. You might wonder whether it’s possible to fast for that long, but people have gone on hunger strikes for 40-50 days or so and survived, so it’s believable. The exact number of days is not really the point, though. The point is that Jesus is *starving* by the time the devil comes to him, and very weak as a result, both physically, and one would think, emotionally. So the devil strikes Jesus at this weakest point, asking him to use his divine power to turn stones into bread. Jesus refuses, quoting Deuteronomy.

Then the devil takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple, and asks him to throw himself off, because angels will keep him from hitting the ground. Please notice that the devil quotes this passage from Psalm 91. Just because someone can quote scripture to you, doesn’t necessarily mean you should listen to them. Even the devil can quote scripture for his own purposes. But Jesus refuses this temptation, too, quoting Deuteronomy again. Then the devil shows Jesus “all the kingdoms of the world,” which he says he will give him if Jesus worships him. Of course Jesus refuses this, with a final quotation from Deuteronomy.

You might say, well, Jesus is God, so of course he will be able to resist these temptations. But for us to see Jesus subjecting himself to being tempted in the wilderness helps us to see ourselves and our temptations, and what to do

about it. Jesus always turns to God, always trusts in God, to show us how we, too can trust in God. So when we see Jesus refuse to turn stones into bread, this helps us to see how to refuse the easy, but the wrong way out. Yes, Jesus could do this miracle to feed himself, and maybe no one would know, but he would betray who he is if he abused his ability in this way. It's kind of like cheating on a test, or on your taxes, or telling little lies that don't seem to matter. No one would know, no one would be hurt. But if we do this, we would be hurt, because this kind of sin breaks down a little bit of who we really are every time we do it.

When Jesus refuses to throw himself down from the spire of the temple, he is refusing to be spectacular. Yes, he could be saved from falling to his death, and everyone would see this amazing scene. But again, calling attention to himself simply for the sake of attention is not what Jesus is about. He is about love, not spectacle for its own sake. But in our culture we love spectacle. Remember the Super Bowl halftime show this year? Rihanna performed, dressed all in red, pregnant, suspended in the air on transparent, acrylic platforms. Whether you're a Rihanna fan or not, the show was attention-getting, but after it, there was some complaint that it wasn't spectacular *enough*. Apparently she wasn't moving enough, being amazing enough—up in the air. We crave spectacle. So when we get the chance to be spectacular, it's hard not to take it. Like posting amazing things on social media that make it seem like our life is terrific all the time. Selfies with celebrities. Or just lots of selfies. Social media encourages us to be ever more impressive, to have more online followers, more "friends." But is this what we're about as Christians? To be spectacular simply for the attention? For the ego boost? No. Jesus shows us how to turn to God, instead of going for the ego boost.

And when Jesus refuses to worship the devil in order to have political power, he shows us how to refuse the abuse of power. For instance, how to refuse to bully someone who is weaker or smaller than you. Or how to refuse to bully someone who works under you. How to turn away when we're tempted to put someone down—a server, a janitor, a child. Every day we are tempted to use our power in inappropriate ways, and if you think you don't have power, think again. In this story today, Jesus shows us how to both send the devil away, and to turn to God.

A colleague of mine said that he doesn't like talking in terms of the devil, or of Satan. He says it's better to just think of there being evil in the world. Well, it's certainly more comfortable to think of it that way. But C.S. Lewis's book *The Screwtape Letters* helps us to realize that convincing us that the devil isn't real is part of the devil's plan. In this darkly humorous book, Screwtape is an undersecretary to Satan. Screwtape is writing letters to his nephew who is a demon in training, giving him pointers on how to do the work. He says it's

important for his nephew not to reveal himself, because people are much less on their guard if they think that no one is really out to tempt them. If we can poo poo the devil, we feel safer, and it's easier for the devil to tempt us to sin. And apparently, encouraging our ego is also part of the demonic plan. The more we can focus on ourselves, the more easily we are led astray.

Jesus's time in the wilderness shows us the reality of evil and temptation. He shows us that we will be tempted again and again, and that we must choose God again and again. And at the end of the story, we see the result of choosing God. "Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him." The temptation in our world is real, but it is limited. Like Jesus, we can resist temptation if we turn to God again and again.

Amen.

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