

"Contending with Satan" (5Mar17)

Matthew 4:1-11;

Romans 5:12-19

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

The devil almost never makes an appearance in our Sunday readings, but it's trouble when he does show up.

It's trouble not because the devil is such a rotten, hellish demon. Actually, much worse than that, the devil has us tricked into expecting a cartoon, imagining when he shows up it's almost comical as the little red guy taunting us on our shoulder. That silly caricature is addressed in my favorite part of the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou*, when wordy George Clooney declares, "Of course there are all manner of lesser imps and demons, but the great Satan himself is said to be red and scaly with a bifurcated tail and carries a hayfork." He's contradicted by the African American guitar player who says, "Oh no. No sir. He's white, as white as you folk." That sense of "white as you folk" may put us on a more serious path.

Still, the conversation was prompted by the guitar player saying he'd sold his soul to the devil. When asked what the devil gave him for his soul, he replied, "he told me to play this here guitar real good" which is met with a pitying response, "oh, son, and for that you traded your everlasting soul?" He simply says, "well, I wasn't using it."

Again, we're tricked into placing these conversations in terms that don't bear much real weight. We either trivialize it as being about an apple or guitar or obscurely imagine the eternal fate of imperceptible souls hangs in the balance, which is so unclear as to become basically nonsensical.

Countering that, you may notice our Gospel reading gives no description of the devil. It doesn't say he's red or has horns or looks scary

or any of that. Neither is this about trading a soul in a Faustian bargain of temporary benefit. In this reading the temptations, while specific to Jesus, are really basic categories. Bread, hunger, bodily wellbeing. Identity. Desiring miracles. Regard or acclaim from others, wanting to be thought well of. None of it is very big or foreign or mysterious.

Again, then, it's probably better not to picture a monster with fiery eyes and cloven hooves but to look at folks as white as most of yourselves—indeed, to look in the mirror. See, the fiercest thing about the devil is that he is so insidious he's working inside of us. Temptations aren't mostly an external reality of a serpent slyly slithering up with suggestions, but are your internal processes of worry and doubt.

Indeed, this fits the term "satan" and should cause us to rework how we identify satan. The word is Hebrew for adversary or accuser. There's a reason for the saying that your own worst enemy is yourself. We have a terrible tendency to be self-accusatory, to look down on ourselves. I'm not saying we shouldn't set high standards, and actually making excuses for poor behavior can fit into this same mold in preempting condemnation from others and thinking we need to try looking good. Guilt can be appropriate, but mostly the guilty feeling of shame and disappointment in ourselves isn't helpful. It doesn't help us improve, but inhibits goodness.

That's also embedded in the term "devil," which literally means slanderer, for scorning God's work, challenging its goodness, and spreading lies or skeptical insinuations. That, and not a cosmic duel, is why we identify the devil as God's opponent. Again, I'm suggesting it's primarily internal, happening first and foremost inside us.

I told Virginia Stumbo I was going to mention her in this sermon. She was talking

about her piano playing for worship and said no matter how well she plays, if there are a couple wrong notes—and even if nobody else notices them—that’s what she dwells on. That’s not to single her out, since without exception you can relate. Such feelings are, by definition, satanic. That self-accusation and denigration, focusing on the negative is the work of satan. It’s diabolical, for example, for Virginia to claim her musical leadership for our worship services is not good enough.

To place this back in the Gospel story’s categories of temptation, we might first recognize the physical and bodily accusations, hungering for more: that I’m not attractive enough or fit enough, that I should have different hair or a different diet. There’s adversity to self in dreading the aging process, of puberty and pimples and self-perception, sure we talk about that. But also of gray hairs and wrinkles and teeth that wear out and sore backs and minds that aren’t as sharp as they used to be. We perceive those as negatives, as faults we carry in our bodies. We’re so susceptible to it that entire industries spring up and the shape of society itself feeds on our warped sense of self-awareness, our fears and insecurities, marketing cures and improvements. It’s an easy sell because we’ve already convinced ourselves we need to change.

That’s bad in itself. But worse, it slanders God’s goodness for us. Our lives bear the image of God in our very being, in our exact existence. It’s not that we’re good when we are exceptionally caring or skilled or beautiful. Even if you feel ugly, unlovable, a failure, still you are God’s good creation. It’s a false accusation against God and you to say you need something else—whether that is turning stones to bread or new clothes or a fancier car or better habits. When such desires interfere with the most basic

truth of your reality, they are lies discrediting God’s goodness in your life.

Next is the identity piece. For Jesus, to some degree it was a challenge to prove himself as the Son of God. Those satanic trials against our self-understanding come to us in feelings we should be better spouses or parents, should make better use of our talents or education or free-time, should have more impact on the world or else that we can’t possibly change anything.

Besides disparaging our identity, there are also the idealized versions, of Jesus being tempted he deserves a miracle, should be able to insist that angels catch him when he falls, is worth not suffering and dying. We’re not immune to those devilish accusations, either, when we claim we’re better and make excuses and look for loopholes, as if the rules don’t apply to us, with self-justifications to protect against others. It’s an odd double vision, that we both see ourselves in the mirror as fragile and broken, but also with rose-colored glasses that overlook our problems and harmfulness. We judge ourselves too harshly and too leniently, and neither is fair or real or how God would identify us.

The third aspect of Jesus’ temptation over the Kingdoms is where internal reality meets external appraisal. We want to be thought well of. We want acclaim. We want assurance we’re doing the right thing. We want to move up in our positions and want the roles with more prestige, more power, more payment as proof we’re doing it right. A friend of mine used to ask how long I needed to be associate pastor before I could be a senior pastor, and even as I was trying to explain it away and express my contentment, I was dealing with the accusations of rank and worth.

The prototypical story of Adam and Eve in Genesis also portrays conflict in having to

encounter others. They became convinced they needed something more—more knowledge, more esteem and authority, being more God-like, even convinced they needed more clothes. Though our excerpt doesn't go on today, we know they wound up in blame, trying to maintain their own sense of innocence by accusing each other: the man accusing the woman, the woman accusing the serpent, each passing the buck and in short order exhibiting the breakdown of relationships with God, neighbor, and creation.

That Genesis story has often been envisioned as the source of original sin. Now, I know that's not a popular notion. But it's not about trying to verify how sinful a baby is already when it's born. Rather, it describes how inescapable these problems are. Just notice how through the centuries this story has been used against women, as if they shoulder more responsibility and as if Eve herself were guiltier of a worse crime. But this isn't about gender bias. As original sin, such prejudices simply portray the truth of our bondage, or—in the words of our confession—that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves.

What then? What of this captivity? What can we do about being enslaved to satanic tendencies, accusing ourselves, turning away from God-given goodness, as fault-finders who stumble into wrongs, bound up in sinful culture with implications for generations to come? Can we escape such a curse?

Although it may seem most obvious, it's not primarily about resisting temptation. Don't presume the story of Jesus in the wilderness begins our Lent as a model for you also spending 40 days contending against the diabolical in your life. Rather, let it stand at the start of a season of baptismal renewal once again to offer you assurance that he has overcome for you, has triumphed over satan, over sin, over

our systems of shame and blame. In Jesus, you may know that God's goodness cannot ultimately be undone. That is the source of your identity and your possibilities. Opposing powers are doomed to failure. Jesus conquers the corrupting influence. In the stunning view of our thick Romans reading, as certain as our imperfections, as sure as sin, as clear as the fact that we will all die, still more prevalent is God's grace for you. Even more rampant than what tries to subvert God's goodness, the victory belongs to Jesus. As much as you seem captive to evils—either as you commit them or are threatened to be crushed by them, either way being subjected to them—yet the reading proclaims they can't maintain their control over you. "Much more surely," it says, grace and God's gift of right relationship "exercise dominion" through Jesus. The relationship can't go wrong, since he makes it right—with God, with neighbor, with creation. Since he is Lord, since God's goodness will persist, no amount of sin, no satanic temptations, no failure, nothing you imagine you lack can define you. They can't own you. You belong to Christ. Your life is entirely his, now and forever.