

Finding and Fighting the Devil

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When a woman was asked why she always bowed her head when Satan was mentioned, she replied, "well, it costs nothing to be polite!"

There are some 300 references to Satan in the Bible. The Bible takes Satan seriously, even if we don't. In the middle of World War II, C.S. Lewis wrote a highly entertaining book about the Devil. The "Screwtape Letters" are friendly advice from an elder functionary in the complex bureaucracy of the satanic underworld. He advises his nephew, a neophyte tempter, about how to procure the soul of his "patient," a young Christian just trying to live out an ordinary life.

He encourages his student devil to convince the young man that in fact, there is no devil! But given massive testimony to the power of evil represented by the acts of Adolph Hitler and all the terrible knowledge we have of those who seek to produce weapons which could wipe out the world, then indeed we know that there are satanic forces alive and well in our fearful world. But when most of us think about Satan at all, it is often in the context of cults, astrology, or Christian fundamentalism.

If we are blasé about the Devil, or devils, in our midst, then Screwtape indeed has very fertile soil in which to sow the advice in his letters. For each of the letters addresses various travails of the human soul and how the devil tempts the soul away from goodness and toward evil. In the case of the young man targeted in the letters, it is not evil on a grand scale, but the everyday, garden-varieties of evil we all know well. The letters show how evil can seep into a Christian's relationships with friends and family, into his views on the Church, even into his practice of prayer.

But if Satan can slip so easily into our everyday, individual lives, consider the consequences when the devil's work affects relationships, groups, and even the global levels of our lives. So let's review what today's Gospel from Mark states simply: "Jesus...was in the wilderness forty days tempted by the devil." The wilderness for Bible writers was a dry place, a "dark place" mostly inhabited by beasts and wandering nomads. It also is described in the Bible as a place for spiritual renewal, a place where reliance upon God becomes a literal necessity for survival.

I was talking with my barber, Ricco, the other day about sermons, of all things! His comment might be one you would make: “I want the sermon to be something about me!” Whether or not I can achieve that for each of you this morning, this sermon **really is** about you and me. For I am sure that the cartoon character Pogo was right on when he observed: “we have met the enemy—and he is us.”

It is in the wilderness that Jesus meets us this morning. We have all had our wilderness times—our moral, psychological, and spiritual dark places, whether we have thought of it that way or not. Even with the TV on, with family and friends around us, or surrounded by our coworkers, each of us has often felt lonely and misunderstood and, sometimes, really angry about that. We can relate to the words from the Ash Wednesday prayer where we “confess...the pride, hypocrisy, and impatience of our lives.....our dishonesty in daily life and work...our blindness to human need and suffering...our prejudice and contempt toward those who differ from us. ” But then, if we can bring ourselves to be really honest about it, are we really all that penitent?

What I’m going to say is not like the doctor who says “take two Tylenol and call me in the morning.” It’s a harder truth the Church is asking us to look at today—the truth that there is something wrong with our human condition, something rooted in every one of our hearts that is also bigger than all of us put together. It is something that is often hard for us to see because it affects the way we look at everything. It makes its way into our most personal thoughts, where it undermines our capacity to love, to care, to be generous. And it also infects the decisions of our most powerful governments and institutions. At no time in my life do I remember a time when the Church has had such a special time to speak hard truths in a hard time, and at the same time do this hopefully.

This “something wrong” in our human condition needs to be named, acknowledged, and confessed. The Church and its preachers have looked for kinder words to talk about it, and so we call the problem brokenness, or sickness, or our “tragic condition—the grandeur and misery of man.” But these are all definitions that can take the responsibility off of us individually and keep it away at a safe distance. We call it everything but what the Church says it is—**SIN**. And sin cannot be cured, or fixed, or educated away: it runs too deep for that. It calls for a healing that we ourselves can’t provide: it needs to be redeemed, reconciled, and forgiven. And that demands a whole new way of looking at life.

But how did we get here? The story in Genesis of Adam and Eve in the Garden we hear on Ash Wednesday in other years may not be “true” historically, but it is certainly true in how it communicates transcendent meaning about the human condition. God promises Adam and Eve everything: communion with each other, the world around them, and

God—with just one condition: don't eat from the forbidden tree. And that's all the seducer serpent Satan needed to convince our storied first parents that God was somehow against them and couldn't be trusted. They needed to take care of themselves. So they took the forbidden fruit and ate it. They rebelled, they lost their childlike trust in the Creator, and opened the long human saga of violence, fear, shame, greed and selfishness.

Sin is spelled S-I-N. The word literally has "I" in its center. Sin means alienation from God, being cut off from the harmony we were made for, being turned in on ourselves. When John Milton wrote his epic retelling of the Genesis story, he called it "Paradise Lost." There is a deep intuition in us of an original good, an original harmony for which we were made. But fear and distrust of the Power that called us into life are rooted in our psyches, too. And so ours is a paradise lost as we become a human race that anxiously, rebelliously, sees, takes, and eats as it pleases! Pride and an inflated self become our way of life. Or, for those who have been injured, exploited, and unfairly treated, sin leads to a deflated and cynical self that doesn't have the faith, strength, and dignity that each of us deserves as one of God's beloved children.

C.S. Lewis in his "Screwtape Letters" has the master devil telling the neophyte devil: "remember the great achievement of us devils is to convince your victim...that there **isn't** one!" As another great writer wrote, "the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?" Have you noticed that we always ascribe the highest of motives to our own actions?

An Episcopal priest told a story a few years ago that he found himself in a telephone booth in London. In this booth, there was a sticker that read: "if you are tired of sin, read John 3:16," beneath which some wayward evangelist of another profession had written "if you're not tired of sin, call 721-2211." We may laugh, but let's be honest: the longer we live, the more we realize that in every human heart, yours and mine included, contradictory impulses are at work. We can fail to see how connected we are—with each other and with God.

Years after writing "Paradise Lost," Milton set out to write "Paradise Regained;" the story of how humanity might find its way back home. The story he turned to was the one we just heard---Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. "Turn stones into bread," Satan says, "cast yourself from the top of the temple, bow down and worship me and you can rule the world." The seductions of evil haven't changed much: cling to material things, put success and security above everything else, use power as your ticket to happiness.

But to all of these, Jesus, the one St. Paul called the new Adam, said a resounding "**No!**" In one magnetic life of faithfulness to God, Jesus broke the chain of sin and death, and we are drawn to follow him in the way of truth and faithfulness. The word we have for that is repentance. And if we resolve to repent and take a new path in life, Jesus Christ gives us the resources for that act of an honest heart. And if we can be honest, say, for an hour here on Sunday, maybe we can be that honest for the forty days of Lent.

SO, quit even being polite to the devil! Our sincere repentance and God's loving forgiveness—this is the hard, hopeful, and honest prescription we need. Then maybe we will discover what kind of people we can be, we will be able to change some pieces of our lives, and we will see how much we belong to each other and to God. So with that, I wish you---and me—an **honest and a hopeful** Lent!

AMEN