

Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent
RCL Lectionary, Year C
[Deuteronomy 26:1-11](#) / [Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16](#) / [Romans 10:8b-13](#) / [Luke 4:1-13](#)
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The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Jesus and the Heart of Temptation
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Over the past few years in conversation with a number of our members and those preparing for baptism, the question of Satan has come up – along with the images the name conjures: from Medieval devils with pitchforks to fire and brimstone fundamentalism. Maybe the name brings to mind the off-color character “Church Lady” of Saturday Night Live of past decades, who was oft quoted by my friends. When confronted with anything vexing or troubling to her churchy sense of propriety, the Church Lady would ask: “Could it be Satan?”

Maybe we should laugh a bit – both at ourselves and the image of Satan. Martin Luther famously quipped, perhaps thinking in some ways of today’s Gospel reading, “The best way to drive out the devil, if he will not yield to texts of Scripture, is to jeer and flout him, for he cannot bear scorn.”

Similarly, a great twentieth-century theologian, Karl Barth, was critical of the seriousness of the later German schools of theology when it came to the demonic. He asked:

*How can we make clear the victory of Christ? In this way: when speaking of sin, demons, darkness, by not speaking of them in too tragic a manner—like the German theologians, all so serious! The further north you go in Germany, the more they are concerned with the realm of darkness. And if you move to the Scandinavian countries, all is darkness: God against Satan, and vice versa! ... It is not wise to be too serious.**

Perhaps Barth, too, addresses the apparent need of some of our sisters and brothers today to find a demon under every rock, every tree, in every book or way of life they do not approve.

So with our general discomfort with Satan, what do we do with this famous reading from Luke today, so vivid with its depiction of a fasting Jesus in the wilderness pitted against the devil: the personification of temptation and darkness?

It might behoove us to remember that the biblical understanding of the devil, and probably Jesus’ understanding too, was a little bit less about Medieval art and horns and pitchforks than it was about the mystery of all that ailed creation and the human family. Demons were held widely accountable for disease and distress of all kinds. Humanity was struggling constantly with an invasion of forces beyond our control, and it was an invasion from within as much as from the outside. And personifying them -- externalizing and objectifying them -- was one understandable

* Karl Barth’s *Table Talk*, ed. John D. Godsey (Edinburgh: 1963), pp. 16-17. Courtesy “Nothing New Under the Sun” <http://nothing-new-under-the-sun.blogspot.com/2006/06/laugh-at-devil-and-he-will-flee-from.html>

way 2,000 years ago of doing exactly what we do today in a slightly different way through science – objectifying and studying the dangerous things in us or in our world from virulent pathogens to dangerous weather patterns. We put the former under the microscope. We launch satellites in orbit to keep an eye on the latter.

Our risk as twenty-first century Christians as Lent begins is in throwing the baby of the profound teaching of Jesus in the wilderness out with the metaphorical bath water. We do this in one of two ways. Either we dismiss the story from Luke as somehow quaint – that is that this story about Jesus and the devil is just an artifact of late antiquity. . . based on a worldview to which few, if any of us fully subscribe. Or we treat it as so reified, so pious, that it must be beyond us. That is we might say that Jesus, as the Son of God, the Savior of the World, was the only one qualified to grapple with the Tempter in this way. Only this great Olympic gold medalist, the first athlete of spirituality would have the moxie to confront such an event. "Go Jesus!" we shout from the stands, and might feel inspired yet unchallenged ourselves.

But both dismissals profoundly underestimate the powerful spiritual lesson Luke places so masterfully before us this first Sunday in Lent: a lesson that, to my mind at least, cannot be overstated in its importance. For this gospel passage deals with the very foundation, the very heart of human temptation – and I don't mean Satan – whether we are first-century or twenty-first century Christians. Jesus is not simply dropping verses of scripture to contradict the devil or entertain or impress us. He's talking to his own heart, and, quite vividly, to ours.

My spiritual director is fond of pointing to a teaching by the great contemplative and Cistercian monk, Thomas Keating. To paraphrase his teaching, Keating notes the three centers of need each of us has at the basis of our personhood, in the very foundation of who we are as creatures of God.

One is the need for safety: shelter, food, a sense of security.

Another is the need for power: some control, at least, over our own destinies and the world around us.

And the third is the need for the esteem of others: to know that we are loved.

Anytime one of these needs is threatened or undermined, we most often respond with our most basic emotional reactions of fear or anger. Or we give up something profoundly important in our lives, as figures of scripture do from Esau in Genesis giving up his birthright because he's hungry. . . to the ancient Israelites going after false gods, kings, and bread and circuses -- testing God because they do not trust the love the divine has for them.

Keating's teaching illuminates today's Gospel, revealing that Jesus is struggling in the wilderness with precisely the same kind of needs we all struggle with as human beings, no matter where or when we find ourselves: our hunger, our desire for control, our seeking out proof of God's love for us.

The refusal to give into any or all three, the renunciation of these essential desires to dominate and control him, is about Jesus gaining spiritual mastery of his own ego, of offering these desires

and fundamentally his life back to God, and to therefore gain a kind of faith his journey in the wilderness commends to all of us:

Bread is not enough by itself – a spiritual truth that goes back to our reading today from Deuteronomy, where the first fruits – the first bread, if you will – is offered back to God, the God who gave the land to a people seeking a new home. How easily we can satiate our own hunger and forget the source from which all our sustenance comes! Only when we remember first from where all our life arises can we truly offer thanks for the bread we receive, and embrace the humility of our dependence on God and God's Creation. This is why we pray before we eat, and why we are called to give before we take, save, and spend for ourselves.

Power over our own destiny is perhaps one of our greatest preoccupations. But all of us who have been caught in that quixotic pursuit at one time or another know that it gets us in trouble sooner or later. We can risk ending up consumed by our own power. History is replete with those who succumbed dramatically to this temptation and the havoc they wrought on thousands and sometimes millions of other lives – we know their names almost as well as our own: Napoleon, Hitler, Jim Jones. You can name more. Jesus knew some as well: Some of the kings of ancient Israel from the traditional stories he heard in synagogue as a youth. Perhaps Caesar of his day, or the despotic governors Rome sent to rule Israel from Jerusalem. Maybe he thought of some of the corrupt religious authorities he knew he was going to confront sooner or later. Most of us are not in a position to do as much damage as they did, but if we give into our own desire for power and allow it to dominate us, we find ourselves dangerously encapsulated in and blind to our own weaknesses, and even our greatest gifts can become curses.

Finally, we so desperately want at some level to know that we are loved. Jesus is drawn by temptation to the center of his world, to the very top of the Temple, so that he might throw himself off it to test God's love for him. We so often succumb to this desire to do whatever it takes to test and earn the love and esteem of others around us. It's an occupational hazard for me, one I must always be vigilant about. If I give in I can drive others close to me simply crazy, and leadership eludes me. It's how we become co-dependent, easily manipulated, and servile. It's how we lose our unique identity gifted to us by God. And, as a matter of faith, we risk falling into the trap of forgetting God's love for us: abundant and overflowing. The problem for us and for Jesus is once we start testing God's love for us, we might never stop. What if Jesus doubts his anointed calling or God's love for him again? Will he find a higher pinnacle from which to throw himself? He knows the truth – that certainty about anything in this life, whether the mystery of God or the secrets of our own hearts...certainty about these is an illusion. Doubt is not the true enemy of faith. Certainty is. And, my sisters and brothers in Christ, we do not love to be loved by God back. You might pick that up on occasion in Christian circles, but it's dreadful theology. Anyone who tells you that there is a way to be certain we are loved is selling something – maybe something as simple as their own ego: their own need to be loved.

We love because we have faith that God loved us first, and goes on loving us in more ways that we can possibly imagine. We give, because God we believe gave to us first, from the food before us to the life that we have with all of its ups and downs. And we have faith, even if only as a tiny as a mustard seed at times, because it was given us in the midst of our own wildernesses by our God, and this faith, no matter how small has gotten us this far!

It is from this lesson that Jesus gains true insight into his own human soul, and into all of ours, and he teaches us by example to choose God first, even when we are at bottom, down and out, at the edge of everything. From there flows all of our true power in the Spirit – to heal, to serve, to love, to seek, to ask, to have faith. From there we can put aside our desperation and grasping. Such is the challenge of Lent as we begin, walking with Christ through our wilderness, facing down and even laughing off our own inner demons, learning to shrug off the constant demands of our needful desires and accept with open, outstretched hands the grace that already awaits us: the love of the broken bread and the shared cup, the gifts of Christ who has made us his own, the promise we have received that leads us into life. . . and life so that others may truly live.