

Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Luke 4:1-13

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania, 19333
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

First Sunday in Lent
February 25, 2007

TELL THE DEVIL TO "GET LOST!"

Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"
When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time. *Luke 4:12-13*

I don't believe in *the* devil as a malevolent fallen angel with a hooked nose, pitchfork in hand, cloven hooves a goatee beard and a forked tail. Though I must say I find the image quite compelling as a representation of all the moral evil, deceit and cunning that raises its horned head in the world. The image was inspired by the Christian theologian Origen's mythic tale of a fallen angel in the 3rd century AD, and in later centuries the poets Dante and Milton so embellished the image that the mythic figure crossed the boundary from literary artifice to living being in the popular imagination.

While I don't believe in the devil as a personification of evil, ask me if I've been tempted and, of course, the answer is yes. Ask me if I've ever succumbed to temptation, and I'll tell you, yes. If I ask you the same, every last one of you will be obliged, in good conscience, to answer, "Yes." Temptation and succumbing to thoughts and actions against our better judgment, and the teachings of Christ, are as common as Southern Baptists in North Carolina, where, I recall from personal experience, there are actually more Baptists than there are people.

The term "devil" emerges in the New Testament as a Greek translation of the Old Testament "Satan." But Satan was never, in the Old Testament, a bad or fallen angel. Satan was, on the very few occasions he is mentioned, not a purveyor or minister of evil, but quite the contrary. He was indeed "the adversary," but one who works for God as a sort of prosecuting counsel relentless in his search to uncover the truth, rather like the Catholic function of the "devil's advocate," a priest-theologian charged to uncover the full truth about a candidate for sainthood. That's precisely Satan's role in the Book of Job.

Of the Bible's 1,300 or so pages one third is narrative, one third poetry. Both rely hugely on metaphor to speak to us. This metaphor is interested in one thing only—speaking the truth. The truth is not found in

how something looks or is reported—that, and I'm not being cynical or facetious here, is the flawed and ambiguous realm of politics, religious fundamentalism, and the law courts. As to the latter, if you have never seen Sydney Lumet's directorial debut, "Twelve Angry Men," with Henry Fonda, I offer it in evidence. So when the book of Revelation or Jesus speak about "the devil" they are much more concerned to convey why people make wicked moral choices by being receptive to lies, undermining justice and goodness, than promoting some antisocial supernatural delinquent with a bad attitude.

If the gospel writers had told the story of Jesus temptation in the wilderness as a philosophical discourse between Jesus and his (that is *our*) capacity for pride—appealing to Jesus' ability to use his power in any direction—it might have made for a good theological treatise, but would hardly be as engaging as having a malicious spirit breathing hot enticements in our ear, which is far closer to our experience. The only way to address that inner dialogue is to choose the good, to choose God. Which is precisely what Jesus did. So if it helps, tell the devil, in effect, to get lost! This is the substance of the Lenten message.

The devil is the repressed capacity in all of us *not* to choose the good. Evil is not a thing cultivated by a fallen angel, like a virus in a Petri dish. Evil is the capacity of the human heart to exclude God from our thoughts and actions, to make wrong choices. Our God gives us that two-edged freedom. Evil is as night is to day. Not something but the absence of something. I cannot think of any instance of evil that is not related to human choice. I can think of lots of things we fear, hate and despise, like tornados and genetic aberrations, but none, outside of human agency, that are willful in origin. Nature isn't willful, it has no freedom of choice, it just is. Each year in confirmation class I ask the young people "If there were no people in the world, would there be any evil?"

Temptation to do what is contrary to the way of God for us (what the church calls sin) is rooted in pride. Pride, said Evelyn Underhill, is the arch sin. It is so because temptations appeal to what we know we are capable of, what we know we have the capacity to do. Which is what makes us so potent. We humans know we have the capacity do extraordinary things. We have the capacity to inflict emotional pain, or to love unconditionally; to give or withhold forgiveness and reconciliation; to hold others lives in limbo by our decisions; to wage peace or war; to speak the truth or manipulate the truth. Pride in the spectrum of our possibilities expands in the soul only to the limits of ambition, which is to say, to the limits of what we can conceive. For the Christian even the smallest step of independence aside from asking

does God approve of this, displaces God with ourselves. In other words, we choose to become god unto ourselves. If it's helpful to name that duplicitous self in such moments, feel free. Tell the devil to get lost, as Jesus did. It really isn't any more complicated than that.

In his remarkable little book, *Temptation*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us (I confess I'd never considered this) that the Bible tells only two explicit temptation stories, this one of Jesus in the wilderness, and the one in the garden of Eden. All other temptation stories (David and Bathsheba, for instance; 2 Samuel 11) have to do with these two. The cure for temptation in both stories, most explicitly in Jesus' temptations, is to turn our attention away from the thing itself, which is what Jesus does by appealing to Scripture. He looks not just the other way, but toward the source of wisdom and healing. Rather than wrestling with the thing itself, he absents himself from it.

When I was in England ten days ago I spent some time with my middle brother, Geoff, whom many of you met at Carolyn and Michael's wedding—can you believe over five years ago. On a rain soaked Saturday, huddled under a common umbrella we strolled around the lovely historic wool market town of Guildford in the rolling hills of Surrey, where he and Barbara live. We ambled around the thirteenth-century moated castle where King Henry III wooed his great love, Eleanor of Provence, next to the ancient pristine bowling green. We browsed open market stalls on cobbled streets leading down to the River Wey, where recreational barges were moored in pairs like sleeping lovers waiting patiently for spring.

That scene, in the midst of a bustling town, reminds me of the small town which, many years ago, decided to have a canal running from a nearby major river to the center business district. The canal bed was dug, and the town fathers thought they now had their waterway. But a fungoid weed sprouted in the canal and grew profusely, preventing the passage of boats and barges into town. All sorts of remedies were tried: acid was poured, in those less enlighten days—well, perhaps not!, as well as many forms of herbicide, but the weed, after abating for a time, would only come back stronger than ever. Then some bright soul suggested that willow trees be planted along the banks of the canal. Gradually, the weed disappeared. The nourishment that otherwise went to the weed now went to sustain the willows.

It's all about changing the company we keep, allowing our energies to flourish in another place. Anatole France tells of a conversation between God and the devil about an upright, moral woman who had served the church faithfully for many years. God demanded of the devil, "How did you

dare to tempt so marvelous a creature as that?" To which the devil replied, "She came onto my grounds!" When you feel tempted, tell the devil to get lost, but be sure not to hang around in the devil's playground. Shakespeare recognized that danger when he wrote in *Henry VI, part 3*, "Where the fox has put it's nose, hell soon find means to make his body follow."

Every temptation resisted is a little death; not to temptation—remember the last line of our text, "he departed from him until an opportune time"—but a death to pride. Amen.