

Third Sunday in Lent
February 14, 2016
The Rev. Denise Trogdon, Rector

The Devil Made Me Do it!

If you are over the age of forty, you may remember a variety program in the 1970's, the Flip Wilson Show. Flip Wilson was a bright, young African American who created various characters that made us laugh at ourselves. One particular personality that comes to mind today is Geraldine, a sassy young woman that Flip often portrayed, as he wobbled on to the stage in heels, a wig, and a miniskirt.

Geraldine was always getting into trouble and her most famous excuse was, "the devil made me do it!" In one particular skit, Geraldine's husband, exasperated by her spending, hears the proverbial excuse, "the devil made me buy that dress!" And he replied, "Then why didn't you say 'Get thee behind me, Satan?' She quipped, "I did, but he said, "It looks great from behind too!" If you haven't seen this show, you can check out Flip Wilson and Geraldine on You Tube for a good chuckle.

What makes us laugh at these skits is the part of ourselves that we recognize but don't readily admit. Confronting our own vulnerabilities can be unsettling. Yet our scriptures today remind us of God's wellspring of strength and courage offered to us.

The Deuteronomy passage recalls how God heard the cries of the Israelites and delivered them from bondage, and out of Egypt. The Lord would go with them as they journeyed through the wilderness to the land of Canaan. In the psalm, the faithful are promised that God will shelter them under the shadow of the Almighty, giving angels charge in times of trouble. Paul's letter to the Romans claims that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. The gospel story of Jesus' encounter with the devil in the wilderness takes place just after his baptism. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus was protected as he faced temptation. Claimed in our baptism, God's Holy Spirit moves within us to guard and guide us in our desert moments.

All of the Abrahamic religions have a devil figure that tempts humanity to sinfulness. This character challenges faith in the Hebrew Scriptures. Some regard the devil as allegorical; others personify this figure as a supernatural being in opposition to God's goodness. No matter how we understand it, we have all encountered that which separates us from God.

Our culture is under assault every day by messages that seek to shift our alliances and that ultimately erode our identity as beloved children of God. Achieve this, strive for that and you will be more beautiful or powerful or more affluent. When we become self-reliant, we are susceptible to forgetting God's promises and tempted to believe we don't need God or each other. But when our plans fail, how human it is to attribute our troubles as God's abandonment. Repentance or turning away from these temptations is an act of faith. God's meeting us in those wilderness moments is God's faithfulness to us. These are the most sacred encounters with God.

Once Jesus came out of the wilderness he began his ministry of preaching and teaching. In his journey towards Jerusalem, Jesus followed up John the Baptist's message of repentance with the good news of God's unending love. He challenged his followers to turn away from evil and to rely on God's saving grace and mercy. These are the promises that we make in our baptismal

covenant, to turn away from that which is not life giving, and to turn towards God. Perhaps in our Lenten travels we may examine our hearts in regard to these promises. Can we face our vulnerabilities in truth, humility and faith? Can we trust that God will not turn away from us and allow the Holy Spirit to work within us to draw us near to God?

When Lent approaches I often hear, “What are you giving up for Lent?” If these forty days are about self-denial or will power, then giving up chocolate or wine or another temptation makes perfect sense. But if this journey is about turning towards God and trusting in God’s abundant care we might want to consider giving up the “temptations” that keep us from relying on God.

For instance, what if we decided that we would give up anxiety for Lent? Anxiety allows us the illusion that we are in control. It would be a daily discipline to practice trusting in God’s grace and provision. How many times do we forget our humanity and take matters into our own hands, when God’s peace is available to us if we can let go of the outcome? Giving up anxiety for Lent could release our worries and quietly strengthen our trust, because we could only do this with God’s help. Anxiety can bind our hearts to the point that we are not available for relationship with God.

Maybe we could consider giving up “busyness” for Lent. The payoff for being busy is that we feel needed, which is such a human desire. And yet busyness comes between us and a prayer life, opportunities to serve, and an authentic connection with God. In fact it shallows most of our relationships. If we give in to busyness, our hearts become frenetic and burdened. What might we do if we had more time?

What if we gave up self-importance for Lent? This temptation has to do with our sense of power and mastery in the world. We forget that our identity and worth is created in God’s love rather than our achievements. Practicing humility not only grounds us in our collective need for God and one another, it places us in solidarity with those who truly experience powerlessness.

Now you might not have considered that anxiety, busyness or self-importance could be considered temptations, but they have certainly captivated our hearts. If we are really honest, these things most likely separate us from God. If we were able to shift even a little anxiety to trust, busyness to more serenity and self-importance to humility, we would be changing our heart’s condition. We will face temptation, and sometimes lose. We will encounter that which separates us from God. But will we turn and move towards God?

I invite each of you to take some quiet time to find the desert places in your heart. Look at them with courage and trust that God will meet you and walk with you in love and compassion. Shame or condemnation has no place in our journey of repentance. Remember that the Holy Spirit dwells within us, drawing us together in a community of support and help.

We come to this table to be renewed and reminded of God’s covenant with us. Draw near with faith, taste of God’s mercy and know that when we face trouble, God will be our sure defense. God gives us courage to face our fears and to overcome them. We began this Lenten journey with ashes that come from a refining fire; ashes that settle into the crevices of our vulnerable hearts. May the God who called Jesus to the cross and supported him on the way, be with us all. May Jesus, who calls us to follow, be constantly in our hearts. And may the Spirit, who stirs in us, guard and guide us. Amen.