

First Sunday in Lent
March 5, 2017
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The Law and the Devil

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written: ‘He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’” Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’” Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

In light of today’s readings I would like to explore two things: first, knowing the law; and second, proximity of the devil. We all vary in our definition of what the devil is—an embodied entity or a condition of hatred or destructive forces. However you define this, our scriptures describe it as very near us.

First—Knowing the law. In the New Testament text we discover that Jesus is a good student. As he is presented with choices by the devil, each time he answers with passages from Deuteronomy. Jesus had studied the Torah well, and was able to recite the verses, even when hungry, even when under duress. His defense against temptation is knowing the laws which God set before Moses and how those laws applied to everyday life. The name Deuteronomy is from the Greek word which means a second or repeated law. The book is not a repetition of the laws but the application of those laws, a guidebook, to how the people should conduct themselves as they live in the land of Canaan—the promised land. Deuteronomy is the nitty gritty of how the law would be practiced after 40 years in the desert. A guidebook of conduct upon arrival in the promised land, a place of bounty. And with that bounty, there would also be a multitude of temptations that would be present.

Let’s think about another return to the Israelites homeland. In Rev. Denise’s Ash Wednesday sermon she spoke about Isaiah’s warning to the Israelites 100 years after

they returned to Israel from Babylon, another wilderness of sorts. After their return home, they were sticking to the letter of the law, but acting in less honorable ways. Isaiah calls out their hypocrisy in keeping the law: Let me read it again: “Look, (Isaiah says) you serve your own interest on your fast day, and then oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.” The lesson, as Denise said, is that your attitude and your inclination of heart are essential matters in keeping the law.

Jesus is about to begin his ministry, which will lead to our promised land, our salvation. He is led into the desert and relies on his knowledge of the law to establish his boundaries with an ever-present temptation to destruction. The devil tries to attack him physically, while he is weak. There are a variety of types of hunger—physical, emotional, spiritual and even intellectual. To be hungry is a state of being. It is not bad in itself. It is how we seek to be satiated by our hungers that takes us toward destruction. In this story, Jesus is physically hungry and physically weak. And yet, his reliance is fully on God.

The devil tempts Jesus with ruling kingdoms—with power. Jesus returns all the power to God and God alone. The devil tempts Jesus with ego—taunting him—“if you are who you say you are, the angels will protect you from being hurt by the fall from this pinnacle.” Sadly, Jesus will hear this again as he hangs on the cross, “If you are the Son of God, save yourself and come down from the cross.” The devil, temptation, is near.

Which brings us to the second point I’d like to talk about, the proximity of evil. I am troubled by the proximity of the devil to Jesus in this story. Three times the text speaks of this: “The tempter came to him . . .” “the devil took him to the holy city” “the devil took him to a very high mountain” The thought of the devil being this close to Mary’s son really gets to me. It challenges my maternal instincts to protect. We do not want anything around our children, no matter what their age, that could harm them. There is a haunting scene in Mel Gibson’s 2005 movie “The Passion of the Christ” where Mary is in a crowd lining the road where Jesus is walking. She is the only person the crowd that can see the devil stalking Jesus. She is fully aware of the danger looming. But she is the only one who sees. Like the other bystanders, I think we have become blind to seeing many forms of evil.

I’m not sure if it is prosperity theology or marketing, but I think we’ve become accustomed to thinking that if you do everything right, and stay consistent with your prayers and are faithful in much, that evil cannot not come close --- that the hot, vile breath of Satan cannot invade our lives. But Destruction is always present. And because of this, it is essential that we continue in our prayers and faithfulness. The reality is that evil exists in this world. A chilling part of this reading is that the devil even knows the scriptures and quotes back to Jesus Psalm 91 - the destruction is informed, knowledgeable and attempts, in wily ways, to find our weakness.

The question of evil, and how God allows evil practices, has been debated by great theological minds and, frankly, has reached no sufficient answer or conclusion. I’ve

read a lot about this and most recently, the thoughts of David Felton and Jeff Proctor-Murphy have rung as close to true as I can find at this point in my life. They write: "In the midst of pain and suffering in the world, Christians remember the pain inflicted on a man of compassion, truth, and integrity. In his suffering we see our call as people of faith to resist evil and injustice in whatever forms they manifest themselves. Wherever and whenever we can, our call is to do all we can to help alleviate suffering and pain and not to stand idly by. We are, as Paul reminds us to 'not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.'" (Romans 12:21). We know the laws, we know good from evil. We are called to keep a close eye on where we are complicit in systems that give rise to injustice. We are called to keep a close watch on our hearts and to assure that what we speak and how we act match up.

So in our readings we have the garden and the apple and the tempter and man's desire to be all knowing. We have the promised land but it is filled with all types of idols to which we frequently bow down. We inhabit a promised land in our salvation through Jesus the Christ and our gratitude is to be expressed by alleviating suffering wherever we encounter it. To act. Perhaps, because of our faithfulness, the forces of destruction want all the more to foil good. Humans made a choice in the garden- it's always that choice - stand to do good or evil and to wrestle with the complexity of inaction when we see injustice so that we are not complicit in evil.

Jesus' response to evil from Deuteronomy presents both encouragement and warning for us:

- Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.
- Do not put the Lord your God to the test.

and the ultimate direction for us all—Worship the Lord your God, and serve God only.