

The Church of the Holy Cross
First Sunday in Lent
March 13, 2011
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The Nature of Evil

“But the serpent said, ‘You will not die...you will be like God.’” (Genesis 3:4)

Today at first glance it feels like a disconnect to hear of serpents and devils in our Scriptures when the world has just experienced a real evil in the earthquake that wiped out a portion of Japan and has threatened the entire Pacific Rim. This is a non-moral evil for sure, an unpredictable force of chaos that is part of our fragile earth. But in the senseless destruction of human life, God’s own creation, the name for it is still evil.

The Christian community does what it has always done: we commend the dead into God’s care, we pray for comfort to those who mourn and for all the people of Japan, in particular our Christian brothers and sisters Bishop John Kato and the people of the Diocese of Tohoku. And we participate in the work of healing that has already begun.

We are appropriately shocked and grieved when evil happens like this. But in a strange way the cosmic or conceptual approach to evil, destructive as it is, keeps it at a safe and comfortable distance. The stories in today’s Scripture, however, offer a different side of evil: related for sure, but so much more up close and personal.

I wonder sometimes what our 21st century ears actually hear and what our imaginations do when we hear the ancient story of the serpent in the Garden of Eden successfully tempting Adam and Eve to disobey God; and when we hear the story of Jesus resisting the temptations of the devil. My mind goes to a childhood Bible that is not anything like the children’s Bibles today--this one actually had an illustration of David beheading Goliath, but my favorite was this showdown-like standoff between Jesus and the devil--they just don’t make Bibles like that anymore.

There are other associations too for serpents and devils: the world of magic (Merlin and the Knights of the Round Table) filled with demons around every corner; a collective memory of witch trials in Salem Massachusetts, the real fear of evil spirits and demon-possession that led to brutal treatment of anyone on the fringes of society; or perhaps the best known horns, pitchfork, and goat-like qualities that have become the cliché of all devils.

At the turn of the 20th century the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche coined the phrase “God is dead,” by which he meant that the assumed moral universe of Christendom had come to a close. But in the 20th century it is really the death of the devil that takes center stage--and for many good reasons. Now “the devil made me do it” is all the air time the devil gets in our language--it just feels too old-fashioned to take this seriously. TV advertisements will sometimes have an angel on one shoulder and a little demon on the other to help you decide which detergent to buy.

We get corruption and greed and terrorism and illness and disasters as signs that that forces of evil exist--but these are all outside forces. The whole devil/satan language has for better or worse disappeared from our daily lexicon and certainly from our cultural awareness. The psychology of mental illness has explained the demon-possession stories, and the advances while not always curative have offered some healing and understanding of people who suffer from mental illness.

The great American Thomas Jefferson, third president of the United States and principal author of our nation's Declaration of Independence literally took a pair of scissors to the New Testament. His goal as a good Enlightenment intellectual was to cut out all the unpractical and un-useful parts, namely Jesus' healing miracles and driving out of unclean spirits--and tame this old-fashioned document into a philosophy that would benefit the common good. This is where we get our common-sense approach to Scripture: devils and serpents just don't hold up too well to common sense.

It's no wonder that temptation and sin and devils have been put out on the edges of our language and awareness. Temptation is the sentimental notion we give to a chocolate craving, sin is an oppressive word of the small-minded; and devils are humorous characters of mythology.

Now I happen to be a product of this as much as anyone in this room. But something caught my eye in a recent article by the literary critic Terry Eagleton. He mentions Sigmund Freud's concept of the death drive, "not that we are hell bent on destroying ourselves but that we are persuaded to take pleasure in the act of tearing ourselves apart..." he goes on to write, "The demonic is a kind of cosmic sulking, since comfort and forgiveness would be its undoing. The damned are those who refuse to relinquish their despair, since this would relieve them of their rebellious delight in rejecting Creation altogether."...the demonic are those who...are frightened of giving themselves away and cling to their anguish for dear life, as to a lover. The evil are those who cannot bear the fact that they are incomplete--which is to say, cannot bear the fact that they are human."

The temptation stories from Scripture then begin to cut through my intellectual resistance here. The serpent tempted Adam and Eve by saying, "You will be like God"; the devil in the wilderness tempts Jesus to forget his humanness and to "be like God". The temptations expose the deepest human desire to control, to fix, to take on the role of God--it exposes the sin of not relinquishing this drive until we drop from exhaustion or get paralyzed from overwhelming anxiety, or are crippled from anger and resentment.

My temptations are busyness, anxiety, and knowledge. Busyness is the feeling of ego-importance and the drive for relevance--no time to rest because too much important work to be done by my important self. Anxiety is the heavy blanket that covers us, the voice that is ever whispering in our ears that we are lazy, not doing enough, not working hard enough, not getting it right. We can never rest, truly rest, because this voice assures us that we are the center of our lives, the only generative force to be trusted. And knowledge: the need to know on facebook, on google, on email, on three different phone lines, on television--if we stop for more than a few moments, we'll be desperately behind, out of date, irrelevant!

All of these turn us in upon ourselves--I feel sorry for myself instead of trusting in God. This is not only cosmic sulking but my own sulking and feeling sorry for myself--I refuse to relinquish my despair, since this would be to acknowledge my creatureliness and my absolute limits.

To trust in the power of God would require me to confess my desire to be the solitary and central generative force of my life--and to take credit for it, breathless as I may be, refusing the Sabbath rest, refusing the comfort God offers because to do so would be to relinquish control of my very existence--a terrifying thought. The temptation of Jesus is the story of how evil seeks to seduce even Jesus by playing on his Godness and trying to get him to refuse the fully human parts of his life. He resisted because he really did trust in God to redeem the world as much through his human limitations as through his God-ness. Unlike Adam and Eve, Jesus gives us the model of embrace our limits because he trusts the limitless power of God to save.

Lent is confession and forgiveness time, it is comfort time: the odd Christian way of comfort is acknowledging your desire not too be a creature, but to be a god--to be your own life-force. To name sin and temptation for you: for me it is busyness and relevance and importance and breathless activity and anxiety--all in the name of hard work and church and progress and family. But the opposite is happening: not a spirit of love but a spirit of resentment that the world is not noticing enough--family spouse friends and colleagues are not noticing enough. This is when we start unhealthy practices, to fill the space we think we deserve for trying to be gods.

Jesus overcomes and is the only way we too can overcome, the only one who can overcome for us. This is why we use the word savior, and why disciplines help (church, confession, Communion, fasting, prayer): they don't get us saved, but they get us aware of the gaping need for someone fully human and yet fully God to overcome what we cannot. "To be saved does not just mean to be a little encouraged, a little comforted, a little relieved. It means to be pulled out like a log from a burning fire." (Karl Barth) I don't just need help--we don't just need a little help. We need to be lifted out of the mire of death by the only one who has the generative power of life.

I invite you into a time of naming your limitations and embracing them; a time of confessing that primal desire of Adam and Eve to be the gods of your life. This is our inner chaos, the rebellious force that damages our lives.

The Christian paradox is of course that in naming and claiming your limitations--the most obvious is that of death--we are free to be encountered by the risen Christ, but the God who gives new life right at our limitations; to be encountered by the limitless power of God and desire or God to give new life. Name the desire to be as god and your grief at not being able to do it. It is a kind of death to confront your limitations, there is no doubt about it. But Easter only comes to those who know the truth of the tomb.