

LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION ©

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Bloor Street United Church – Communion Sunday
FIRST SUNDAY of LENT - February 21, 2010
Sermon Notes for The Rev. Joyce Kelly - copyright

Based on Readings: Based on Luke 4: 1-13 (see end of notes) and Genesis 2, 3

Do you remember Geraldine - Flip Wilson's alter ego in a red wig? She was just walking along ... mmmm... when the devil tapped her on the shoulder ... Oh, look at that red dress in the window - right over there ... why don't you go on in, and have a try-on?

Oh, I can't do that, devil - No, no!

But the devil said, "Oh, sure you can. You owe yourself a try-on." And he pushed me – he pushed me right through that door.

I

"The Devil Made Me Do It" has become part of our vocabulary. Temptation taps us on the shoulder every day, and pushes us through all kinds of doorways - economic, sexual, environmental, dietary.

So who is this devil - who thrives in every generation? - Nero, Hitler, Madoff, Williams. The Bible has many names: Satan, tempter, Beelzebub, adversary, slanderer. Naming gives shape to amorphous spirit, helps us get our little heads around something that is beyond human comprehension.

Evil is a very real force in our world, and Jesus' ministry is about facing it down. He teaches disciples (and on our best days, that's us) to confront it, as spiritual masters of every tradition do – with candles, holy water, incense, oil, sage, tobacco - and always, and primarily, with prayer.

In the United Church, we don't quickly name evil (or our involvement with it, sin) – too much confusing conflicting theological baggage. Prayers of Confession often avoid the word - if there's a Prayer of Confession at all. Only our Lord's Prayer brings us back to Jesus' reality – forgive us our sins/debts /trespasses ...

It's not wise to name evil outside of prayer - because to name it is to give it a platform, to bring it front and centre. And if we call it forth (easy, for it's never far away), we'd better be ready to deal with it.

I, like you, prefer angels to demons. But if there is ever a time to confront evil, it is now - as we begin our journey with Jesus into the wilderness of Lent. Today's story is the only one that appears every year of the 3-year cycle of lectionary, one from each synoptic gospel. And today's the day.

Facing the devil. That's where Jesus starts, which is always at the beginning of a spiritual quest. But it doesn't end there.

As Jesus' ministry continues, he faces evil all the time – names it, calls it forth, deals with it face to face. He doesn't succumb to the temptation of looking the other way. Facing temptation is always a sign of spiritual strength, never of weakness – at the core of all 12-step programs!

There's a spiritual law that says that the brighter the Light in a soul, the more evil is attracted. But also, the brighter the Light, the greater the ability to face it down. Our relationship with Christ is our strength. Says Romans (14), "At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow" - spiritual truth.

So in the power of that holy name, we can dare to name it for what it is. Whatever its' guise, the devil is here anyway – in the world, just waiting (as Luke says) for an opportune moment. It's primordial – the way it is, has always been, and always will be.

II

The same old story! The serpent says to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'"

“Well, God said we could eat from all the trees in the garden, just not from the tree in the center, or we will die.”

“You will not die; God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God.”

The woman sees that the forbidden fruit is good and pleasing to the eye, and desirable, so she takes some and eats, and gives some to the man, and he eats.” (Gen 3:1-7)

God says to woman – did you eat?
Serpent made me do it.

God says to man – did you eat?
Woman made me do it.

Temptation pushes the door to evil wide open. And human nature succumbs.

It looks so juicy - surely a little bite won't hurt - a donut we crave, a tax-cut we can almost justify, adultery (even if we think the rules don't apply to us.) Some say the earth is warming because we pollute, but some say it's a natural phenomenon, so I'll just keep on driving my big car, and throw packaging for all my nice new things into the big garbage-pit earth - until somebody else figures it out – it's always somebody else's job. A child lifts a candy bar from a low child-friendly front-counter shelf at the store. Oh well, he's only 4, he'll learn – what'll he learn?

It's the old story – as epic as it is personal and individual - 'easy road' versus the 'high road' that God would have us take for the upbuilding of this, God's amazing Eden, where, if humanity did not succumb to the devil's wiles, all would be in balance and harmony.

On this first Sunday of Lent, Jesus leads us right into the middle the old story. Full of the Holy Spirit, still dripping with Baptism blessing, still full of Transfiguration Light, he is led by the Spirit into the wilderness.

What on earth is the Holy Spirit doing?

What Spirit is always doing, on mountaintop or deep valley or desert – leading, guiding, inspiring, enabling with spiritual strength to face down evil wherever it appears. That’s Spirit Work.

For 40 days, the Spirit leads him in the desert. He fasts - no bread - no water. He prays. His body becomes weak - but his soul strong, and stronger. That’s what prayer does!

And this is exactly what the devil wants to destroy – communion with God.

III

For 40 days and 40 nights, the devil is ‘tests’ (that’s the verb.) It’s the same old story - Father Abraham on his way up the mountain of sacrifice with son Isaac and a bundle of sticks; we’ll climb that hill next Sunday. The Devil wears Prada, and many masks, turns up in all kinds of places as we are just ‘walking along.’

His best trick is to have us think he doesn’t exist – that all we need is positive thinking, eternally irrepressible positive optimism, no matter what is happening.

His next best trick is to entice us with lovely things; how can something that looks that good be bad? But then, if it didn’t appeal, it wouldn’t be temptation, would it?

If it feels good, do it; if you want it, go for it; you’re worth it. “Jesus, you don’t have to do this” (not from an enemy, but from dear friend Peter.) “Get behind me, Satan.”

There’s another trick, too. The devil makes us think he/she exists only in other people, especially those with skin-tone or accent, age or social status different from our own – tearing apart nations, and the whole world.

Geraldine is right; sometimes the devil does make us do it - and can - because we are such soft targets.

IV

We’ve lost Discernment – and, for the most part, don’t know how to find it. How can we ever know what’s really going on? The answer comes, of course, from Jesus. Follow him - his way. Pray! Prayer always opens a channel for Grace. It can do no other.

For Jesus, 40 days and nights, for Moses, 40 years – for you, for me – for all who have ever searched – it takes as long as it takes.

Pray until you can say with Jesus (and it won't be the last time; it wasn't for Jesus), "Not my will, but thine." 14th century Thomas á Kempis wrote, "The road (we) must walk is not always (only) of (our) choosing. It belongs to God."

Pray in your wilderness until God's longing becomes your longing, until discernment comes. And it will. And with it, some objectivity - the ability to see the bigger picture. Oh, not God's whole big picture, but enough!

Pray until earthly debris, and temptation's urges and illusions fall away, until you can stand, with Jesus, fearless, facing the devil and recognize it for what it is – and stare it down.

Pray the scriptures, until you see the whole world, and us in this Eden, continually unfolding God's epic drama.

IV

Face the devil with scripture. Give the tempter his due. His timing is perfect. Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell us that Jesus has not preached a sermon, cast out a demon, or healed anyone. He is alone and hungry, has not yet fully discerned, but is poised right at the edge of knowing what it means for him to be about God's business.

The timing is no coincidence – but then, I think, in God's drama, there is no such thing as coincidence. Luke clearly tells us that Jesus came into the desert "filled with the Holy Spirit." And that's when the devil appears. Evil always seeks to diminish Light and this is Jesus – filled with Christ-Light from the centre of God's very being.

For forty days, the devil tempts him (we know not how), and when he is hungry and tired, when he is weakest, the devil picks up the Eden conversation.

All he wants is for Jesus to take just a little bite. Three times Jesus replies with scripture, all from Deuteronomy. (8:3; 6:13; 6:16)

First: "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." Seems reasonable! Soon Jesus will multiply loaves for the multitudes. Why not now? Why not for himself - he is so hungry!

But, what work of Jesus - healing, miracle, teaching – is ever for his own benefit? None! He is all about God's purposes, and God blows Grace through his willingness. He leaves the devil with its' stone.

This morning, Jesus invites us to his Table, and feeds us with Living Bread the devil cannot touch – with yeast that enables us to rise to the fullness of who God creates us to be, with salt to bring good flavour to life in God's beloved world, all kneaded together by Spirit.

Second: The devil leads him up high, offers him the world. "I will give you all authority, for it has been given to me. If you worship me, it will all be yours." Not unreasonable; doesn't the end justify the means?

Temptation is always reasonable; otherwise it's not temptation. But wait a minute, who says that the 'world has gone to the devil'? Who's given it away? And who says it has to be that way?

"If you worship me, it will all be yours."

Discernment tells Jesus to read the fine print at the bottom of the offer; that's where he sees that the highest position, the greatest authority, in the world, is - in the end, after all is said and done - nothing.

"No," he says, "It is written: Worship the Lord your God and serve God only."

Only God's heights are high enough!

Third: The devil brings Jesus to the peak of the Temple. "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written: for to God's angels is given a command, to guard you in all of your ways. Upon their hands they will bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone" – straight from Psalm 91.

The devil meets Jesus where he lives, immersed in scripture. The devil always meets us where we live. But Jesus knows, not just the words, but also the heart of scripture, which embodies God's cosmic power that is unfolding in this epic drama that we're all in.

God's angels always guard us; it's God's design. We don't have to do anything to deserve it, or prove it to anyone, just live it, trust it. "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

V

The struggle is over - for now. Luke says the devil leaves until an opportune time.

But for now, for us – in this, our opportune time, Spirit leads us, and Jesus feeds us.
Thanks be to God. Amen

Scripture from Luke's gospel 4: 1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit ... was led by the Spirit in the desert, and for forty days was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end was hungry.

The devil said, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: We do not live on bread alone."

The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world, and said, "I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want. If you worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered, "It is written: Worship the Lord your God and serve God only."

The devil led him to Jerusalem, to the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here. For it is written: He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully;

they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot
against a stone."

Jesus answered, "It says: Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left Jesus until an opportune time.