

**Understanding the Devil & Satan** Readings: Gen. 2:15-3:7; Mt. 4:1-11 Lent 1/A  
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Hannah is in her late 30's. From the outside, it looked like she had everything going for her. She was in a loving, committed relationship, was a talented business woman, connected to a nice group of friends, and lived in a comfortable home. But when the lure of methamphetamine began to dominate her life, she succumbed to its power. Was it a free choice? Couldn't she just say *no*? Were the cravings in her body stronger than the rational part of her brain? Was the drug dealer so crafty that she couldn't refuse his offer? Was being "high" more enticing than being "fully alive?" Whatever the underlying motivation was, it resulted in her divorce, loss of business, and homelessness.

It is difficult to know for certain what causes a person to choose the bad over the good. It is often a combination of sociological, psychological, biological, environmental, and spiritual issues that work collectively to pull a person into the darker side of life. An old religious term that sums up these collective forces that tempt and destroy the vitality of a person, is called "Satan" which has become synonymous with "the devil." Understanding this *pull* to the darker side is the subject of today's sermon.

C.S Lewis, the author of the The Screwtape Letters, wrote: "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them." The word *devil* comes from the Greek meaning *adversary* or *to throw over*. The word *Satan* comes from the Hebrew meaning to *obstruct* or *oppose*. In its broader usage, the devil or Satan means the one who tempts, deceives, misleads, discredits, tests, or slanders. These dark and tempting forces can exist within interpersonal relationships, business, government, and even churches. They can take up residence within, usually as deceptive thinking, powerful cravings, or excessive fear.

During the time of Christ, Satan or the devil were understood as an invisible spirit with no palpable body. These terms were used in the New Testament in a metaphorical sense to communicate spiritual forces of temptation, hindrance, faithlessness, and betrayal. It was only in later years that belief in the visible apparition of the devil began to appear. The middle ages saw the world as a place of struggle between good and evil, God & Satan. It was thought that evil spirits entered the soul & body of people. Witchcraft, para-psychic gifts, mental illness, physical illness, heresy, pagan practice, and herbal medicine were often understood as possession and the rite of exorcism or the execution of the possessed were the antidotes.

By the time of the Reformation & Age of Reason, Satan lapsed into what he was in the 1st century: a tempting, invisible, spirit, whose suggestions must be resisted and from whom grace alone delivers us. The scientific world managed to eradicate almost all irrational beliefs about demons, devils, and possession. The rite of exorcism gave way to simple prayer and commitment to the ultimate authority of God. During the 20th Century, science and psychology advanced, along with a rational refined approach to natural phenomenon and mental illness. The devil and demon were replaced with words like personal sin, addiction, passions, and mental illness. Mainline churches began to feel that belief in an external devil blunted the sense of individual culpability. However, neither psychology nor science has fully understood those forces that tempt people to make choices that destroy families, individuals, organizations, and society. Let's take a closer look at today's biblical readings for some insights.

From the Book of Genesis, we hear the mythological story of Adam and Eve. This is an ancient story about temptation. In this story, there is a garden that is warm, safe, and lush. There is an abundance of food and Adam and Eve are free to enjoy and thrive. The only restriction laid upon them is to not eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge. This one restriction becomes a thorn in their side. Unable to resist temptation, they eat the fruit, thus putting an end to the good life.

The story of temptation in the Garden of Eden is an old story to which many can relate. It is similar to Hannah's story in today's sermon. For most humans, enough never seems to be enough and we spend precious time and energy seeking after that which we don't have or partake of those things that are just not good for us. I don't fully understand this tendency, but I do know that "the pull" is real. Maybe it has something to do with our survival instinct or our emotional needs. Unfortunately, survival instincts do not always lead to a healthy lifestyle. Rather, they can lead us into conflict, violence, self-centeredness, addictive behaviors, a loss of character, and sometimes life itself.

This struggle to resist temptation is colorfully crafted in today's gospel story where Jesus encounters the devil in the wilderness. The temptations mentioned in this story involved issues of identity, bodily cravings, security, and power. These are the same temptations that have propelled some middle-class Americans and Europeans to join the ranks of ISIS. Oftentimes, the pull is so strong and the tempter so crafty, that people end up compromising their values, beliefs, dignity, humanity, and even their own lives for the sake of a compelling ideology.

I recently read an article by Courtney Lee titled: "When did Christians Become Comfortable with Loss of Truth?" Seeking the truth and living by the truth is at the core of the Christian Faith. However, some Christians have compromised their faith walk by giving a consensual nod to fake news, alternative facts, and false witness. What are some of the forces in our society that have the power to seduce Christians to become comfortable with a loss of truth? I think the list is complex but it certainly would include issues such as fear, the rapid changes in society, expediency, a lack of critical thinking skills, a rise in populism, and the willingness to achieve end goals through dishonest means. When the end becomes more important than the means, then making a pact with the devil seems like a reasonable way to go.

In today's gospel story, Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights and afterwards he was famished.

1. The tempter came and said to him: "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." For those of us who have strong bodily cravings, the struggle to say *no* to food and drink never seems to end. So great is the enticement of fat, sugar, salt, and alcohol, that we are willing to ignore our high blood pressure, abnormal blood sugar levels, and even our obese physique in order to satisfy the cravings. My mother used to tell the story about my older brother. As a baby, he would scream for more food and she could not shovel the food in fast enough. Six years later, I came along and I didn't want to eat. She couldn't pry my mouth open and had to resort to a tiny demitasse spoon to feed me. (BTW: This is no longer a problem!) Some of us have a genetic predisposition to over eat or have an empty void that is so large that we must work extra hard to moderate our intake.
2. Then the devil took Jesus to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple saying: "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down." The thirst for power and control, fantasy thinking, and dangerous risk-taking is a pull that causes many people to make poor choices. This posture in life plays havoc on those in their families or organizations. These folks are not inherently bad, but rather they want something and do not believe that goodness will it get it for them.
3. Again, the devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor: "If you fall down and worship me, all these I will give you." To worship means to embrace that which is worthy of our attention and energy. For some, issues surrounding security and money become a powerful force. Worshipping the golden calf is nothing new but when our desire to have more, better, bigger, and faster becomes insatiable, the devil takes over. To sacrifice one's happiness and ethics in order to increase the bottom line, is a dangerous pact, especially in business. Beware of purchasing goods made on the backs of people forced to remain in abject poverty so that companies can increase their profits.
4. The tempter said to him: "If you are the Son of God..." It feels good to be recognized and validated. But when our need for approval, affection, and admiration causes us to be inauthentic or compromises our values in order to be loved, well then, we have sold our soul to the devil. Self-esteem issues are one of the most vulnerable areas where temptation can successfully influence the choices we make. Gang-related activities are a case in point.

The pull of darkness, the power of temptation, and the ease at which distorted thinking arises, are part and parcel of the human condition. Whether you call this "pull" an adversary, temptation, deceit, cravings, passions, addictions, weakness, racism, sexism, oppression, greed, prejudice, Satan or the devil, there are dark forces that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. Some are external forces as found in corrupt organizations. Some are internal forces like addiction. Because many of us are especially vulnerable to these forces, we do not have the ego strength to just say *NO!* That is why we all need to strengthen our internal spiritual resources so that we, like Jesus in the wilderness, can resist the pull of darkness by saying: "Away with you Satan!"

These internal spiritual resources include practices like prayer, fasting, solitude, and 12 step programs. They include embracing moderation in all things, guarding the heart by removing oneself from unhealthy environments, and learning to discipline our mind to prevent compulsive and disordered thoughts from turning into destructive actions. And while the pull of darkness is real, the power of God's grace is salvific. And so we continue to pray: "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, now and forever, Amen."