

Lent 1, Year A

- One of the most famous lines in the 1995 film *The Usual Suspects* is spoken by Kevin Spacey's character, when he says, "The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist."
- With all due respect to the screenwriters, and for that matter to Charles Baudelaire, whom that quote was paraphrasing, I don't think that's exactly true
- The greatest trick the devil ever pulled wasn't convincing the world he didn't exist. It was convincing the world they didn't need anyone else.
- Convincing them they didn't even need God.
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- That's the story in our readings this morning, these two most famous temptation stories
- The first from Genesis, this story of the temptation in the garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve are led astray.
- Tempted by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, tempted by the power that that knowledge presents.
- Tempted by the possibility that they were clever enough, smart enough, to exploit a loophole and find that they'd come out ahead.
- Tempted by the idea that maybe, if they ate that forbidden fruit, they would be powerful enough that they wouldn't have need of God.
- Satan is saying to them, "You can do what you want. You don't have to follow God's rules, don't have to be God's servants."
- Of course it's a lie, just as it has always been a lie, but by the time Adam and Eve realize that, it's too late.
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- And then of course there's our Gospel story, the one about the temptation of Christ.
- Where the devil comes to Jesus, who hasn't eaten for forty days and forty nights,
- You can make your own bread from stones, rather than relying upon the people whose vocation, whose livelihood it is to make bread.
- You can do incredible deeds of power, can defy the laws of physics, of nature itself. You can be the ruler of all, if you just turn away from God.
- In this moment of temptation, Satan is saying, basically, "Listen, Jesus. You got this. You're plenty powerful enough, you don't need anyone else, you can do this alone."
- Jesus, as the book of Hebrews says, was tempted as we are, but without sin

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- Both times, both stories, the message is more or less the same.
- “You’ve got this. You don’t need anyone else, don’t even need God. You can do this alone.”
- What, pray tell, could be more tempting for us than that message? That American dream of self-sufficiency, of pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps, of having earned our way to where we are today, and being able to earn our way to where we want to be tomorrow?
- What could be more tempting than unregulated self-affirmation run amok, to the point of denying our reliance upon others?
- I feel like that’s always going to be our biggest temptation.
- The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was tempting countless people, convincing them, “you don’t need anyone else. You don’t even need God. You can do this all on your own.”
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- If you’re anything like me, the one observation that is basically inevitable during this season of Lent is the same one I have every year around this time: the main thing that gets in the way of my relationship with God is me.
- My wants. My desires. My plans for the future. My pride in myself and my need to get the credit.
- The urge to prove that I’m capable, that I’m sufficient, that I can do it all, no matter what ‘it all’ even is.
- That I’m up to whatever task comes my way.
- I don’t think I’m alone in that.
- I don’t think I’m the only one who wants God’s help when things are bad, but doesn’t want to acknowledge God’s ever-present help when things are good.
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- So there are a few things happening here at Grace this Lent that I want to let you know about
- Starting this morning we (are/have been) talking in our Sunday morning adult forum about the Nicene Creed, that statement of faith, of trust, that we recite every week.
- We’re delving deeper into it and what it means, how it is meant to be our confession of trust in God
- And then beginning this Thursday evening, we’ll be praying the Great Litany together, that great prayer of repentance and of beseeching God’s help.
- We’ll be breaking bread together, remembering how deeply we rely upon one another.

- And we'll be discussing five books of the minor prophets, one book a week – examining their call to turn away from ourselves and turn instead to God. The prophets are a non-stop wakeup call, and if you're interested in joining us, by all means, read the book of Joel and then come this Thursday night.
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- Because I think in some ways the most important thing to do during Lent is to fight that urge to believe in ourselves above all.
- To fight that urge to turn away from God and toward ourselves, toward the idol of self-sufficiency
- To instead seek connection with other people, and to realize all the ways in which we're dependent – upon each other and upon God.
- To seek out and find God in community, and to try and tamp down our own desires, our own temptations. To recognize that we can't do this alone, no matter what 'this' is.
- To refuse to listen to that voice saying that we don't need each other, or that we don't need God.