

Lent 1, Year C

- I don't want to alarm you after just having heard the Gospel story of the temptation of Christ, but in some quarters it is no longer fashionable to believe in the devil
- While a strong majority of Christians still believe in the devil, it appears that Anglicans and Episcopalians are among those for whom belief in the devil is maybe one of the sketchier bits of our faith
- Just a few years ago the Church of England approved a baptismal rite that removed the question asking if those desiring to be baptized renounce the devil and all his works that has historically been a part of Baptism
- And I know a number of Episcopal clergy and laypeople who would do the same with our baptismal liturgy, if they could
- Maybe it just seems outdated, I don't know, or like something we as a society have moved past
- But even if that describes you, even if the idea of the devil as a personal actor in and on humanity makes you nervous or uncomfortable, that's all the more reason, I think, we should struggle with the story, with what we are to make of Christ's temptation
- You see, if we really want to wipe out the idea of the devil and replace it with a vague notion of 'evil', then this story becomes really difficult to parse out, to make sense of
- For one thing, if we don't believe in the devil, but only in some notion of evil, then we'd have to hold that in this story, either Jesus is tempted by evil or Jesus isn't really tempted at all – and each of those is a difficult thing to hold onto while at the same time recognizing that Jesus is the Son of God, is God Incarnate, God made flesh – as the author of Hebrews said it, hasn't God been tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin? And how could we imagine a good God being tempted to do evil?
- And then, when you get right down to it, it's tough to say that the things that Jesus was tempted with were evil in the first place
- After all, there are three things referenced in this passage, three temptations presented before Jesus Christ
- And all three of them were things that Jesus would eventually have, or do, or be – we can see this in hindsight
- Make food where there was none? Did that! Be crowned the rightful ruler of creation? Did that! Have God supernaturally preserve him from perishing? Did that!
- The story of the temptation isn't that the devil tempted Jesus with things he shouldn't

want, things that were of themselves evil, or even things that Jesus shouldn't have

- As one commentator put it: the three temptations were bread, power, and safety.
- Those are three good things, for Jesus! All three were rightfully Jesus's – the temptation wasn't toward something bad, something evil – it was toward something good – just at the wrong time
- The lie that the devil tells Jesus in this story isn't "these things that are evil are actually good."
- The devil isn't trying to convince Jesus that up is down or wrong is right. That's way more work than the devil would have to do!
- The devil wants Jesus to say that God's timing isn't good enough – to believe the devil when the devil says that God won't take care of Jesus
- That is the big lie the devil tells in this story, the one to try to tempt Jesus: "God won't take care of you. You have to look out for yourself."
- And so, as we think about this story, if you're ever wondered to yourself if the devil is even real, I just have to ask: Don't you know a devil like that? Hasn't something like that ever been whispered in your ear?
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- Anytime I read this story, every time I think about this kind of temptation, I'm reminded of that great work by CS Lewis called *The Screwtape Letters*
- If you're not familiar with it, it's a brilliant meditation on evil, temptation, and the devil, in the form of a series of letters from a demon named Screwtape to his nephew, a Junior Tempter, named Wormwood
- Wormwood has been assigned to a particular human, a recent convert to Christianity, and tasked with leading this particular human astray – drawing him away from the faith and away from God
- And while the book is chock full of wisdom about the nature of evil, I think one passage is particularly appropriate when we're talking about temptation, and this story of the temptation of Christ
- Screwtape writes, "Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy's [meaning God's] ground... [God] made the pleasure: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy [God] has produced, at at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which [God] has forbidden."

- The season of Lent is not a time to forget that God is good
- The season of Lent is not a time to forget that we are all part of God's good creation
- And it's also not a time to imagine that following God is as easy as eliminating the obvious evils from our lives
- Sometimes sin is nothing more than wanting the right things in the wrong ways or at the wrong times
- This season of Lent, the time of year when we really seek to grapple with the notion of sin, is a time to think about the things that we desire, the things that we're tempted by – all of them
- Because even good things can lead us astray, just like they could have with Jesus, if Jesus had listened to the devil, had given in to the devil's temptations
- Whether we believe it or not, we have our own temptations, maybe not every moment, but they're never far away – the fear that God won't look out for us, won't provide what has been promised, that we have to look out for ourselves, rather than waiting for God
- The worry that we're on our own
- Even in the wilderness, God will provide
- Even when tempted by the devil, God is still with us
- And even when we stray, God loves us. God waits for us. And God rejoices when we eventually find our way back.