

- Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
- Romans 5:12-19
- Matthew 4:1-11
- Psalm 32

So today we get to talk about Lent and temptation and the Devil! The Devil actually shows up in the Bible quite a bit, very, very active from the beginning. And mentioned actually over 80 times and is named of course the Devil, Satan, the Accuser, the Tempter, the Ancient Serpent, the dragon, the Deceiver of the whole world. But it's interesting because actually the most mention of the Devil happens in the New Testament. So after Jesus shows up on the earth, the Devil gets really busy and gets going because there's a lot at stake.

The Devil's job is to double down and tempt us. I was talking to a friend about this sermon and about temptation and she said to me, "Oh, you know what you should do? You should fill a bag with everything that tempts you and do a show and tell for everyone." And she was like, she knows me really well. She's like, "So don't forget to put cheese and crackers and cake and chocolate and ice cream and your smartphone and credit card." I do like retail therapy and you know, and some other things that I won't mention to you.

So she's like, "And then you can pull out each one and say, look at what tempts me, what tempts you?" And I thought about it and I thought, well, number one, I don't think there's a bag that's big enough, but here's the truth. If I brought that bag in, it would be empty. Do you know why? Because I give in to my temptations. So what am I supposed to do? How good are you at saying no to the temptations and telling the Devil to flee?

I don't really like these stories in the Bible. The Genesis story just absolutely depresses me. Because there's Adam and Eve and they have everything they could want and yet they can't help it. They are still tempted by that which they shouldn't have. And I get so frustrated, I get frustrated because everybody blames it on the woman, but she's super smart. She was like, it's here. It's good for food. It's a delight to look at. And how good would it be for me to know everything because I'm stuck with Adam? She's like, I'm going to eat some of this and I'll give some to Adam too because he can't take care of himself. And then of course the Serpent has deceived them and everything goes wrong and now they have to make coverings for themselves out of fig leaves.

I used to really not like this story because I recognize myself in Adam and Eve. I recognize all of us in Adam and Eve if we were in that story. But then I heard Father Bill at one of his classes give an amazing interpretation of this. It's either from priests of old or rabbis of old, people who are old who said that the coverings that they made, Adam and Eve, was actually because before they ate the fruit they were made and their organs and their body parts and their muscles and their sinews all were exposed.

And so the covering was a metaphor and it was God giving them their skin. And I was so struck by this because I thought, well my goodness, if it weren't for Eve doing what she did,

none of us would be made whole. We wouldn't be who we were meant to be. And it was as if we needed Eve to be exactly who she was supposed to be, mistakes and everything, in order for us to be whole. In other words, when they did what they did, when they ate the fruit, they were actually being who they were supposed to be, themselves. They were broken. They didn't know any better, and they didn't trust God. But through that, God made them whole and made us whole too.

Peter Rollins, who's one of my favorite theologians, is fond of saying that God comes to us in the dirt, the grime, and the mess. Not to clean it up, but to bless it and to let that be our wholeness. So with Jesus coming to us, we don't have to now figure out how to ascend to God, but amazingly miraculously, we can celebrate our fractured and broken lives because God has come down to us and made it holy.

Now, the temptation story in the Gospel of Matthew, of Jesus being tempted by the Devil feels a little bit more straightforward, right? You know, you have Jesus, He's out in the wilderness. He's hasn't eaten for 40 days, 40 nights, and he's understandably hungry, and there's these three different temptations that are seductive in their own way.

Right? There's the temptation for Jesus to turn the stones into bread, to take care of himself, or there's the temptation then to jump off of the ancient version of a skyscraper and to make God do something for you, to demand God to do your will. And there's the final temptation to become the most powerful person in the whole entire world.

So how does Jesus handle temptation? Well, it seems like it's this battle of wits. It's like the Bible face-off. The Devil quotes one verse and then Jesus follies with another and then the Devil quotes another. It just kind of goes back and forth and apparently Jesus is getting it right because the Devil keeps changing places and trying a new scheme until finally he gives up and goes away. And I just thought about this. I know the Bible pretty well, but if the Devil came to me and we did a Bible face off, I would choke. I'm one of those people who are like, I know exactly what to say 24 hours after it happens. So, I would lose this battle.

Now, you know, there's this spiritual exercise where you're supposed to put yourself into the Bible story. And I thought if I put myself into that Bible story and I haven't eaten for a bazillion gazillion days, I'm a hangry person. So if I haven't eaten three hours ago, it's not pretty. Can you imagine not eating for 40 days?

So then the Devil shows up and says to me, Manisha, here's some stones. Just turn them into bread. I'd be like, oh my God, I didn't know I could do that. Can I make it brioche? I really like brioche. I'd be like, hey, do you want to join me and we'll make some grilled cheese? I would take advantage of this. That's who I am. And maybe if you were in that story, you'd be like, what? We can make bread out of stones and you just go around and start making all the bread in the world and then go and feed everybody because your generosity and your way of thinking makes you do that.

Or maybe you're the one who says, ah, now that I know how to do it, I'm going to go teach other people how to do it too so that they can go and teach other people, and you create this whole system of making bread out of stones. Or maybe you're the one who's like, this is

incredible. I can do this. And you sell tickets for free, and you invite everyone to see the amazing thing that God is able to do. Whatever it is, the Devil really hates it when you are being you.

So the way that Jesus dealt with the Devil was he was himself. In our text the Devil asked Jesus, if you are the son of God – but it really should be translated as it is in the Greek. Since you are the Son of God – and then the Devil tries to make Jesus relinquish His identity by doing things that the Son of God wouldn't do. But Jesus resists. Jesus wants to be Himself, and so the Devil flees. Not because Jesus got all the right answers, but because the Son of God remained the Son of God. And that was a person who came into the world to save the world and not Himself.

And so our temptation in Lent is not trying to resist whatever's in your bag. The temptation that the Devil presents to us over and over again is not to be our whole selves. Wrapped up in our own skin, broken, falling short, making mistakes, and not getting it right

In the Lutheran church in the Southeast Michigan Synod, in I think it was 2005, 2006, we had a Bishop. And he was amazing. He was larger than life, figuratively and literally. He was large. He was wise and caring and profound. And when you received a hug from this Bishop, it was large, so it was like encompassing and you're like, ah, the warmth of God. And it was amazing. And I mentioned he was large, right?

Well, one morning he was getting ready for a Synod council meeting and he went down to get a clergy shirt from the basement and he didn't make it up back the stairs. He had a massive heart attack and he died at the age of 47. I went to his funeral. Lots of us did. And it was painful and it was difficult. And people were saying, let this be a lesson to us. We need to change the way we're living. And there was conversation about having clergy wellness initiatives.

A year later, I had the amazing privilege of having lunch with his widow, his wife. And in one of the most profound experiences in my life, she became deeply vulnerable. And she said to me, after John died, I wondered, should I have done something differently? I should have at least tried to change him and make his ways so he could be with us, change them and make them better. But then I realized then he wouldn't have been John. That's who John was.

The Devil is trying to tempt us not to be our real selves by saying over and over again, you're not enough. You're not quite right. You don't have it. So our temptations are not weaknesses that we have, our temptations are not to avoid our failures. Our temptation from the Devil is to believe in our core of our being. That we are gruesome because of our mistakes, our failures, our weaknesses, and the evil we do.

It is a temptation to think that what we have done has undone us. Our temptation is to believe that God can't bless this mess. Only if I do the right thing and I have the right answers and I say the right things and act the right way, then I will be holy. Our temptation is to think we are not already holy. You're holy and you're on dangerous ground if you think otherwise.

Now, I realize that it's dangerous ground also. And you can play the Devil's advocate and accuse me of saying, well then, it seems like everything is fine and everything goes and I can be anything I want because God has blessed it all. But I would argue that it is equally as dangerous to think that if a person changes this or that, that then they will be made whole. We are whole and that's the scandal of Jesus. He ate with tax collectors and sinners and scribes and Pharisees and priests. Why? Because they were all holy, because there isn't a single price that Christ is and wherever Christ is, there's wholeness and fullness and abundance of life, and it's the Devil's job to convince us that that is not the case. And that is what the battle is all about between the Devil and us. The Devil wants you to believe that you still need work to do in order to be good.

Now there's another danger and that other danger is to actually believe that there's nothing then you can do to change and that you're doomed. You are who you are. So I was actually talking to my spiritual director about this conundrum. Because I thought, well, if God loves all of me, all my problems and everything, then what does it mean to die to self?

What does Jesus mean when He says those who lose their life will save it? And he quoted Thomas Merton to me from the *New Seeds of Contemplation*. And Thomas Merton talks about all of us having our false selves. These are the selves that we create around us. A kind of a mask, a kind of armor, if you will, and often comes out of places of pain and trauma. And these false selves protect us. But we use these false selves often to hide our imperfect, true self because we're really afraid of being who we really are.

I was talking to Father Chris the other day and he just described this dilemma really wonderfully to me. He said that every one of us is a scared child of God. We're frightened to be our own true selves. And we think we need to be someone we're not, or we need to hide who we really are. And that's your false self. So during this Lent, you're invited to say goodbye to those false selves. And it's not that hard because really the only power the Devil has is to tempt you. So here's a way that another spiritual director described how to deal with the Devil and the temptation of having your false self.

So he said, imagine that you are on a subway platform and you're standing there and it is you. It is your real true self. And here comes a train. And in the train is the Devil and the doors open up and there are your false selves. The one that you have so you can be accepted, you can be noticed, you can be important, you can not be embarrassed by yourself. And the Devil wants you to get on the subway and join, and all you have to do is stand there and be yourself because eventually the doors close and the Devil gets whisked away.

During Lent you are invited to engage in repentance and change. We're going to invite everyone during communion to, if you'd like, come forward to St. Paul's and we're going to have some healing prayer over there for anything you need, any kind of prayers you want. But I especially invite you, if you can, to seek prayers for yourself so that you can be your whole imperfect self with an empty bag because the Devil loses when we are most fully ourselves, and thanks be to God for that.

Amen.

[End of Recording]