

March 9, 2014

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent Matthew 4:1-11

There is an old saying which goes, "The only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it. At least that's the fun way to do it!"

Yet somehow that's not what Jesus tended to teach. In our gospel reading we have the scene of the temptation -or testing- of Jesus by the devil in the wilderness. This takes place right after Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. If we're looking at this text in light of our Lenten sermon theme of 'encounters with Jesus' we have a bit of background work to do.

The problem with this gospel reading is the devil himself. Talking about Satan or the devil is passé. If you were to go back to your non-church going friends and they asked about what went on in church today, how would they react if you told them the sermon was about Satan? How would they react if you told them that you believe in a human-like creature called Satan who ran around the world tempting people to do evil things? They'd think you were nuts, or at least part of a weird religious sect that believed silly old myths.

No, Satan has no place in our language today - and that suits Satan just fine! If there is any force that benefits from people not believing in it, it is evil. It is all too easy these days to chalk up bad behavior as ignorance, or child neglect, or mental illness. Many highly educated people insist that if everyone were properly educated and empowered, we wouldn't have problems that could be called 'evil'.

In my opinion, an idea like that is a witness to the arrogance of secular humanist ideas - thinking that people are by nature good.

So, if we are looking at a meeting between Jesus and evil, how should we understand evil? (I assume we don't have problems believing that Jesus existed!) We could take a symbolic approach. That would be to say that the temptation of Jesus is a literary device the gospel writers invented to describe the struggle he faced as he tried to *sort out his calling as the Messiah*. Or, that this can be a symbol for how to resist *temptations to do destructive things*. But there are problems with that. None of the things Jesus is tempted to do are bad

things! In fact, they're all good things. The temptation to turn a stone into bread is the temptation to get food when you are hungry. The temptation to throw himself off the temple is for him to use his status to attract followers. The temptation to worship Satan is the temptation to help someone with their quest for safety and security and they'll help in return.

No, a symbolic approach to this text just doesn't work. Plus, make the Bible too symbolic and you've devoided it of any power. The true power of Christian beliefs is that they are incarnational - or that they are real. God loved you so much that he came to you - in real time and space to be with you in real ways you can understand. No, a symbolic approach doesn't cut it.

We have to acknowledge the reality that there is some clever deceptiveness at work in this world that seeks to draw us away from trusting in God's goodness. And when it succeeds in that, God's goodness goes awry and people get hurt badly. Is this clever deceptiveness in the form of a little red creature with horns, a pointed tail and a pitch fork running around? No. Is it a snake gliding through a perfect Garden of Eden? No.

No, evil is a form we cannot define - and evil likes it that way. Evil is a force you cannot control, limit or understand. And evil likes it that way.

Notice that the three gospel writers who write about Jesus temptation in the wilderness, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, do a very clever thing when they write about Jesus' temptation. None of them even attempts to define evil or describe the devil. They just allow it to be a force that seeks to draw Jesus away from trust in God's plan.

If you can define your enemy, you can beat him or her. If you cannot ever define your enemy or isolate it you cannot win. In the battle of good vs. evil we lose. We lose always.

Fortunately that is not our battle to fight. That is the battle Jesus fought for us.

When undefinable evil met the real, solid, human Son of God, it had met its match. Jesus wouldn't be dissuaded. He

would not use his power to grant himself exceptions to the limitations of authentic human life.

And do you see the cleverness of the temptations? Evil was tempting God by saying: you don't have to play by the rules you set. You're God. You can change the rules. You don't have to be limited like a regular human. You don't have to take this incarnational thing all the way. Just do it 99 44/100<sup>th</sup>% of the way. That'll be close enough.

This might be deeply heady stuff, and we're going to return to it more fully on Easter Sunday, but it gets at the question of why Jesus had to be crucified in the first place. Skipping many steps, it is because the only way God could still be God and stay true to God's promises to humanity, was to be fully 100% human; and defeat evil on those terms.

The devil, in whatever form - we cannot define it, took on the real definable Jesus head to head. It twisted goodness, lied about reality, and made false promises. And it could not break the strength of Jesus.

Evil left its head to head encounter with Jesus in a defeated state. Jesus would not be moved. He couldn't be successfully tempted to live outside of the limitations of real human life. But evil wasn't gone.

The temptations continued. The strongest of them comes not here, but on the cross as you know. The temptation there was, "If you are the Son of God come down from the cross and we will worship you." The temptation was, "Save yourself."

When evil meets you, you may win. That's great! But don't expect it to stop. Evil has all the time in the world. A recovering addict will say that he or she is never beyond the addiction. It is always there. Evil didn't let up with Jesus.

But Jesus ultimate triumph over evil means salvation for us. Jesus' success is our success even as we fail. We do not want to live in a way that we exploit Jesus triumph. We don't say, "Jesus withstood temptation so now I can indulge in every temptation to the fullest without consequence." But when

tempted we can say, "Maybe I'll win this one. Maybe I'll lose. But either way, I win because Jesus wins, and his winning is what counts."

That is actually the true power of faith - trusting God when it looks like God can't be trusted. May you find yourself firm in faith even when you feel weak, and may you know the strength of God even when it feels like all is lost. Amen