

“DEVIL’S NIGHT,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, March 2, 2022

Tonight we begin the new season of Lent. We inaugurate it with our gospel reading of how Jesus, fresh from baptism at the River Jordan, immediately plunges into forty days and nights in the desert. But it’s more complicated than that. Because it involves the devil too.

I know that in popular culture we usually associate the devil with Halloween. But for us, the faithful, tonight is actually devil’s night. He’s right there as Jesus takes his desert plunge, which we recall every Ash Wednesday.

Do you believe in the devil? Or, perhaps I should say, do you believe that the devil is real? Well, if we have any doubts, here he is for all to see and fear, the embodiment of the demonic and destructive and all that we should despise.

Interestingly enough, no one actually knows the full length of Jesus’ desert stay, which begins with his meeting with the devil. It is entirely possible that Jesus spent long years in the Judean wilderness, possibly from teenage days, when the Prophet John baptized him, to his late 20’s or early 30’s, when most astute scholars of the Bible believe that he began his full ministry, gathering the twelve apostles and hundreds of disciples to his side. This particular age sequence would certainly explain why Jesus did not get married at age fifteen or sixteen as most young Jewish men of that era did.

In any event, what makes our evening gospel story so remarkable is the desert challenge which Jesus faces. Amid the desert’s dirt and scrag Jesus is confronted by three temptations from the devil himself. Ultimately, this whole desert episode not only reveals three times over why Jesus is so uniquely suited to be our savior. It also clues us to the three greatest temptations which can also lead us astray from God and true discipleship with Jesus Christ, keeping us from being the kind of men and women we truly want to be.

Now, the Apostle Matthew, the source of the gospel portion we have read, tells the story of Jesus’ temptations succinctly and well. But that doesn’t mean that they’re so easily or readily grasped or appreciated in all their spiritual hazard and danger. In fact, it takes a closer look and conscientious attention to realize their full import and persistent relevance for us today. As we all know, some folks insist that the Bible has to be read literally. Yet good luck understanding the devil’s three temptation on that basis! In fact, a figurative or symbolic reading gets us a lot further in discerning the spiritual peril that each of the three temptations pose.

Take a look, quite specifically, at that first temptation when the devil offers a famished Jesus bread. It’s all about hunger, isn’t it? (*Deuteronomy 8:3; Matthew 4:4*) Yet, if rightly

examined there's deeper, broader meaning here. Jesus' first temptation speaks to allure of whatever gratifies our human physical needs and senses. As we all know, there's a lot of other very significant things beyond hunger and a gastronomic appetite that might fall in such a category. Namely, the clothes we wear, the houses we build, the transportation we drive, and the entertainment we pursue. Indeed, this first temptation encompasses everything we think necessary to sustain ourselves in the material world.

Similarly, Jesus' two other temptations are also best understood symbolically and more expansively, rather than as literally and narrowly as we might read them. Jumping a little ahead, for instance, consider Jesus' third temptation. The worlds so marvelously displayed to Jesus as he flies around the globe in the devil's company signify, figuratively speaking, nothing less than worldly power, position, and control. (*Deuteronomy 6:13; Matthew 4:8-10*)

Surely that's a temptation we can all understand! We see it unfold in the images of favorite social media, as well as in the pages of printed magazines. There presented to our sight is everyone from film stars to politicians to corporate CEOs constantly jockeying for the limelight and all the status that goes with it. Billionaire boys with their space toys like Richard Branson, Jeff Bezos, and Elon Musk come especially to mind. But so does Vladimir Putin whose megalomaniacal desire for personal and national glory has precipitated a devastating invasion of Ukraine just this past week. Putin's enthrallment with the "the kingdoms of this world in all their greatness" seems destined not only to destroy a neighboring country and terribly damage his own, but also produce millions of refugees and all the terrible human suffering that goes with it. (*Matthew 4:8*) No doubt about it. Putin has said "yes" to the devil's blandishments and temptation, becoming a diabolical figure himself.

Of course, sandwiched between the seductions of materialism and the quest for power in our passage from Matthew's gospel may be the temptation that trumps all. In this middle temptation, which is not middling in importance at all, the devil tries to incite Jesus to put himself physically in harm's way so as to provoke rescue from God. Essentially, in the midst of tempting and testing Jesus, the devil is calling upon Jesus to test God.

Now our own faith should tell that God would not deny his own begotten son any request. Yet the devil's goal in this moment is to tease Jesus' ego and sow seeds of doubt and distrust between father and son. The devil is hell-bent on precipitating a breach in the heretofore seamless trust, intimacy, and mutuality of their relationship. To this end, the devil cites scripture, specifically, verses from Psalm 91, in which we hear God's promise to protect his faithful servant so that not even his feet "will be hurt on the stones." (*Psalm 91:12; Matthew 4:6*)

Happily, the devil fails to manipulate and hoodwink Jesus. Indeed, Jesus who knows the Jewish scriptures as well, if not a lot better than, the devil and shows this several times over. He cites in retort the words of the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy which warns the faithful against putting “the Lord your God to the test.” (*Deuteronomy 6:16; Matthew 4:7*) Basically, Jesus is saying through all this: *I know who I am. I know God too. Neither of us, Mr. Devil, have to prove anything, particularly to you.*

Congregation, it’s a truism that God made us all differently. Each of us has our distinctive foibles and vulnerabilities. Nevertheless, the three temptations which the devil devises for Jesus in their wilderness are so elemental and encompassing that they really do anticipate every major way that we might as men and women be led astray too. In fact, I would contend that our biggest moral dilemmas today boil down to the sins and excesses that result from our failure to resist the three wilderness temptations that confronted Jesus.

For too many men and women materialism is everything. It commandeers their lives. Look all around: folks are obsessed with things and more things and the pursuit of personal pleasures. It’s the sin of hedonism.

Likewise, there are no shortage of guys and gals in public and private life, jockeying for power, celebrity, and fame. Even ten minutes of notoriety sounds good to a lot of people as we today see on social media. It’s the sin of opportunism.

Meanwhile, amid all these forms of idolatry and the worship of lesser things, we see a breakdown of a trust in God. Our American currency may still claim such trust. But it’s not reflected in the way we use that currency or in attitudes generally.

Today’s younger generations strike me as more skeptical about God. Before making any commitment to God, they want proofs that he exists. They also seem more prone to ask: What’s in it for me? And if they actually profess belief, there’s a not uncommon tendency to second-guess God and his ways. It’s the sin of self-centeredness.

Admittedly, we are all imperfect people. We are born in this world and have to live in this world. Almost inevitably, worldly ways and aspirations are going to infect and impact us. Yet as Christians saved by Jesus Christ with his example to inspire and guide us, we should strive to show some humility and self-restraint in everything we do so that we don’t get entrapped by idolatry and sin. So very importantly, we can make sure that a devotion to God and a personal relationship with him remains our first priority. Moreover, when temptation darkens our path, we can and should be resolute in turning to God for help and the strength to resist it.

Leaning on God and our relationship with him for comfort, guidance, and strength, as opposed to relying on our own resources only, is going to best equip us to withstand and

overcome the wiles and deceit of the devil and that is demonic and morally and spiritually destructive for ourselves and those around us.

As our service concludes tonight you are each invited to come forth in order to receive what, in the custom of the church, is known as an “imposition of ashes.” These ashes which will be used to make a sign of the cross on our foreheads, are the charred remains of last year’s Palm Sunday fronds, when we together celebrated Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. They were put aflame yesterday to prepare for this night. Our purpose in burning palms and imposing ashes is not for the sake of pomp and circumstance. Nor is it show how wonderful we are as men and women standing in faith. Heaven forbid that we should make a spectacle of ourselves! Scripture warns us against that. (*Matthew 6:1-8*)

Instead, we put these ashes-from-palms to use to remind us that everything mortal, including the world’s greatest triumphs and accomplishments, ultimately end up as nothing but dust. The only thing that endures is God and the spirit of those who, eschewing hedonism, opportunism, and self-centeredness, align their mortal lives with his way for us revealed through the life, death, and resurrection of his son and our Savior Jesus Christ. Yes, what we do tonight through this simple concluding ritual for our service is about God and our trusting relationship with him.

Through the next seven Lenten weeks, long after the ashes on our foreheads are washed away, let’s do our best to stand tall against any idolatrous and devilish temptation in our lives, keeping true to God and our spiritual commitment to him. **Amen.**