

Lent 1A Sin's Source

Scripture is full of references to sin—sin is described often as our disobedience to God and God's design for our relationship through the covenant; the relationship with God and with others. Our reading from Romans makes a connection between choices made by Adam in the Garden of Eden and those made by Jesus in the desert wilderness. Adam and Eve's choices led to the humanity's expulsion from the Garden and a breaking of the initial relationship between God and humankind. The choices made by Jesus in the desert led to humanity's redemption and reconciliation with God. In many ways these particular lectionary selections for this first Sunday in Lent seem to give a starring role or at the very least a co-starring role to a character who appears more often in our interpretations of Scripture than in Scripture itself. This is a curious fact since the devil, Satan, the snake, the tempter or by whatever name you call him gets an amazing amount of attention in Christian art, literature and the current culture at large. Think of the poems of John Milton and William Blake; the art of Durer; and even today the appearance of the evil one or one of his minions in blockbuster and horror movies currently released. It seems that even in the imagination of our secular non-religious culture this evil figure looms rather large. The curiosity about this fact is that in the Biblical text itself, where he ostensibly got his start, the Devil is only a bit player. In all of Christian Scripture there are only a few dozen, mostly casual references to an evil figure. And in the entire Bible, there are only three, maybe four narratives in which the evil one has an actual part. The Genesis passage and the Matthew passage are two of them. So as we begin Lent, we will speak of the devil. In our Gospel passage from Matthew, the reference is clear: the devil appears in the wilderness to a fasting Jesus and tempts him to prove his identity. This actually follows immediately after Jesus' baptism. With a few differences in detail this wilderness temptation is also given in Luke, but only barely mentioned in Mark and not at all in John. Within this Matthew passage the first name used for this figure is diabolos which we translate as devil, but the Greek meaning of the word is slanderer. The second reference is to the Tempter which describes what is happening. Another translation for this Greek word is the Tester. And at the end, Jesus says: Away with you Satan! That word is quite properly translated as the adversary. The three temptations of Jesus begin: If you are the son of God, then....do this where the action suggested would demonstrate Jesus' power. It would not demonstrate his obedience to the redemptive work of his mission. In the phrasing of these "temptations" with the word "if" is the why these are seen as challenges to Jesus' identify. Jesus uses his knowledge of previous revelations by God to answer the temptation and does not fail the "test" so to speak. In the lectionary reading from Genesis which describes the first disobedience, we often assume that the temptation of Adam and Eve comes from the Devil, but actually scripture just describes a talking serpent which the text calls "more crafty" than the other wild animals God created. The serpent is never named as evil in the Genesis story. In the culture of the region where the narrative began, the serpent was viewed as representing wisdom or knowledge. The temptation offered by the serpent is to mistrust God's word. The other Biblical references to this evil figure are found in the Book of Job where Satan is found at the beginning among the heavenly beings around God. Only in Luke's narration of Judas' betrayal of Jesus is the devil mentioned as entering Judas. Nowhere in Scripture is there the description of a being with horns and hoofs

and forked tails. So that brings us to the question what is the issue at stake which has resulted in the creation of this personality? Why are we so fascinated by this figure that we create so much lore around it? The question is usually phrased like this: "Is there a transcendent, personified evil power in the universe, an objective reality that is like a person, a person with a name?" A person of equal but opposite intent from God? This is often presented as a choice: "Do you believe in a literal devil, or is all the devil stuff just a grand metaphor, a symbol for the sum of human deceit and human malevolence?" Good Christians come down in different places with their answers to this. My answer is that neither choice is entirely true. I don't think the choice is either the totally literal one or the simply symbolic one. I find that I cannot swallow the horns and hoofs of a literal devil as pictured in so much literature and art. But historically and today so much happens that results in unspeakable horrors. So many unthinkable cruelties are being done by people that I think that there is definitely evil in the world. It is not symbolic and it is more than the sum of its parts. Although Scripture does not spend a lot of time on the subject of the devil, it devotes a great deal of time to the issue of sin and humanity's choice to sin. The second question people usually wonder about in relation to this issue is about whether "that old devil", however you imagine him, is an equal match for God. There have been many who propose a religious construct based on dualism which is the notion that there's a good force in the universe and an equal opposite evil force. Dualism proposes that there is a constant combat taking place between the two and humanity is in the middle. The evil side is represented as being of the flesh or material side of humanity and the good side is in the spiritual. Religion in this scheme is simply signing up to be on the good, spiritual side. Contrary to what some believe, that is not a part of true Christianity. Christianity and all Scripture teaches that God created all the stuff, the entire world of stuff, human bodies included and then pronounced it all good. Christianity teaches that God and God alone reigns over all the world. Of course, the world God created is marred by evil, but evil is never imagined to be an equal to God. God is Lord, Lord of all. And in the end, the final victory will be God's—no ifs, ands or buts about that. Our faith is grounded in this trust that God has the final word. The definitive demonstration of this trust is in the triumph of good embodied in the cross and the resurrection. The cross stands as the ultimate achievement of evil, the unjust death of a perfectly good man—in that narrative is all the injustice, the cruelty, and the death-come-too-soon in the world. But the Christian point is that the cross is **not** God's final word. Easter is God's last word. The last word was and is justice, love and life triumphant. But however you imagine evil, whether as a force or the devil, we need to take it seriously because it does exist. Know that God had the last word some 2000 years ago, but we still need to take evil absolutely seriously. One last important point—evil or the devil is not our master—it or he is our Tempter. In the 80's there was a comic named Flip Wilson who made a career out of a one liner at the end of his skits featuring Geraldine Jones whose response when found out in doing something she shouldn't have done: "The devil made me do it." Audiences loved this and T-shirts with that printed on them were very popular. After all, what a great excuse! It's not my fault. I had to do it. The devil made me do it. But Geraldine/Flip Wilson didn't actually invent the phrase. It is actually a classic excuse. Remember that passage in Genesis we didn't actually read this morning because everyone is so familiar with it. That passage where God asks why Adam and Eve are suddenly hiding because they are naked and afraid. The place where God asks Adam: "Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" Did

Adam say yes I did. I made a bad choice? No, he said the woman gave it to me, and I ate? The Lord asks Eve, "Woman, what is this that you have done?" Does Eve admit to making a bad choice in listening to the serpent? No. The woman said, "The serpent tricked me." No one admits to making a bad choice; I hear the Geraldine refrain: the devil made me do it as each one casts the blame somewhere else; somewhere other than their own choice. That avoidance of responsibility; the use of an excuse for our behavior is a symptom of our sinfulness. We simply don't like it when it's our fault. We do not like to admit doing wrong. But really, the devil cannot make you do anything against your will. Evil cannot inhabit the same body that is infilled by the Holy Spirit. We need to remember that being tempted is not equal to being forced. We may be weak in our human nature, but with Christ in us we have the strength available to resist. When we read the Matthew narration of the encounter in the desert, we read that it is after forty days and forty nights that the Tempter comes to Jesus. Jesus was hungry of course, but I am sure he was also hungry for company. Solitude can also stretch us then as much as weariness. We are made for relationship and, when we are alone and out of context, we can lose the treads of our identity. What is offered to Jesus seems quite reasonable at first: plentiful wonder bread... and later Jesus does miraculously provide food for the multitudes. The stunning jump off the temple miracle would certainly convince the masses of his identity; the utilizing of political power to enforce his good purpose on the world surely would not be evil. In some ways what the devil offered would seem to merely enable Jesus to do what he was called to do. So the tempter who approached Jesus was crafty, like the serpent who presented God's prohibition as God's desire to maintain his own status and keep something from humanity. Matthew tells us the temptations are prefaced with "if you are the Son of God." A subtle, doubt-casting word that "if". If you are who you thought you might be after the voice spoke from heaven, then act on these temptations and you will know. "If you are..." And with a small no Jesus swept away the precarious suggestions. Saying yes to the temptations would pollute everything that Jesus came to do, so Jesus said no to any doubt of his identity. He claimed his identity by refusing to use his power in that manner. He denied the right of the tempter to question his calling and made the ground firm beneath his own feet. The truth of our faith is that we also have that firm ground. Whether the days are crowded or lonely, whether we are thin with hunger or worn out with worries, whether we feel alone or unseen or overwhelmed, the firm ground is ours through Christ. We just have to remember who and whose we are. We don't have to stand alone in the hungry wilderness because Christ stood there first. And that is the Good News found in Lent, when we come face to face with temptations, we are not alone. We are still tempted to claim unlimited abundance represented by bread from stones, unlimited protection represented by the angelic rescue and the unlimited power of possessing all the kingdoms of the world. The results of saying yes to those greedy grabs have real, costly, painful, and sometimes tragic consequences in our world. We forget that God is a God of abundance, that in life and in death we belong to God. And we scramble to take and hoard what isn't ours in the first place. A quick glance at current headlines reveal these things as our habitual practice of giving in to the temptation to possess unlimited resources, unlimited protection and unlimited power. The statistics and data illustrate that we not only want but work to have these things. In the process we have made choices, deals that reflect our lack of trust in the promise of the Triune God. We give into the temptations. But we don't need to be tempted because as Paul declared in Romans Jesus has

said no to temptation; because God's grace abounds, death is defeated and justification, life and righteousness have come to us through Christ. Thanks be to God.