

1st Sunday of Lent
Sermon 3.9.25

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness,² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.³ The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."⁴ Jesus answered him, "It is written, "One does not live by bread alone.'"⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.⁶ And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please.⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."⁸ Jesus answered him, "It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"⁹ Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here,¹⁰ for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,'¹¹ and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"¹² Jesus answered him, "It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time. (275)

You have heard it said that the gospel isn't political. You have heard it said that this whole thing is a matter of personal piety, of each of us learning to choose the right over the wrong. But I say unto you, can't it be both?

Jesus tempted in the wilderness: it's likely a familiar story to you. It has wended its way into popular imagination even as popular imagination is less and less informed by the Bible. It certainly holds a solid place in the liturgical life of the church. Featured in all three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it always ushers in the season of Lent, the season of preparation prior to Easter—which is itself forty days not counting Sundays. This, in order that the church might participate in the life of Christ. Forty days he was tempted in the wilderness. Forty days he fasted to put himself into another state of mind, which is always related to the state of body. So forty days we of the church also fast, however that comes to us to do—"giving things up," whatever things hold us at a distance from God; or adding things in, whatever new disciplines might bring us closer to God, whether prayer or meditation or poetry-reading or devotional-reading or taking a daily walk or reconnecting with old friends, maybe repairing relationships that have broken down. Lenten disciplines take on untold numbers of forms.

The astute church-goer will notice, though, that forty days from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday does indeed involve skipping some days. These are the Sundays of these six weeks, for on Sunday it can never be Lent, for Sunday is always and ever Resurrection Day.

Except for these days, amidst this so-called secular age. Out there, time is leeching of any of its sacred practices, so Lent only really finds you when (if) you come to church, which flips it: these days Lent is on Sundays, and all other days you're good.

Jesus tempted in the wilderness: this is likely a familiar story to you. We hear it every year in church, one of the small handful that we do. It's in all three synoptic gospels, so we hear the version of the gospel of the given year, this year, Year C, to follow Luke's version, which bears much in common with Matthew's version. Jesus has been led by the Spirit to the wilderness where the devil meets him.

The devil: funny, right? To believe in such a thing, to be so primitive and simple-minded as to believe in the devil: it's funny.

Or is it?

Charles Baudelaire, 19th century French poet and essayist, had his doubts. In a short bit of prose, "The Generous Gambler," he writes in the first person a fable, one man's encounter with an unnamed Being so strangely appealing that the man followed the Being unbidden into a subterranean realm. Here the cares of the world have melted away. As in an opium den, all here was unsensed pleasure, the feeling of it with none of the sensory input of it, a disembodied feeling of the sublime.

The two talked as well. They "talked of the universe, of its creation and of its future destruction; of the leading ideas of the century—that is to say, of progress and perfectibility—and, in general, of all kinds of human infatuations." And the Being spoke of his interest "in the destruction of Superstition," admitting even to once (and only once) being "afraid, relatively as to his proper power, once only, and that was on the day when he had heard a preacher, more subtle than the rest of the human herd, cry in his pulpit: 'My dear brethren, do not ever forget, when you hear the progress of lights praised, that the loveliest trick of the Devil is to persuade you that he does not exist!'"

This is one of the few times a preacher shows up in philosophical writing and doesn't look like either a clown or a jerk, so I relish it. But maybe you know that line from a more recent cultural artefact, "The Usual Suspects," a movie that ends with this line by which the bad guy is revealed, revealed to have been hiding in plain sight all along.

An added irony will have me spoil the movie so if you haven't seen it, get out your phone and watch it now.

We'll wait.

Okay? Okay, this bad buy is played by an actor who, well established in Hollywood and familiar on our screens, was also found to be a long-time sexual predator, preying on minors. See, he himself had mastered the trick of persuading the world he was other than what a few people knew him to be, frighteningly to be.

So, do I believe in the devil, you wonder? Am I like that fabled preacher who managed even to frighten the devil by revealing his most clever trick?

I do, in a manner of speaking; and I can only hope so to be.

The Greek word for devil is *diabolos*, which is to say one who divides, and so we see such behavior here. Before we even get to the content of the three temptations, there is the framing of them, divisive: “If you are the Son of God...”

See, because the voice of God had just declared that he is. At his baptism there came the voice to say, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” It addressed him, this voice: it addressed Jesus. But then along comes the divider, casting some doubt: “If...” the *diabolos* who would aim to divide Jesus from himself, cleave within Jesus this essential connection, that Jesus is the Son of God. No, “If you are the Son of God...” which might also be to challenge Jesus, that he should have to prove this, to prove this indeed to the devil.

But that’s me. What about you? Do you believe in the devil? Do you believe in the power of such divisiveness? Have you ever witnessed the creeping in of something destructive or at least eroding, a creeping in to the cleaving of what might otherwise have integrity, resilience, strength?

Like, a classic example, when poor white people are undermined in making alliance with poor Black people, which turns out is to the benefit of the wealthy? Divide and conquer, amiright?

Or maybe you’ve been divided from your own conscience about something you know you must do just because it’s the right thing to do but is scary to do, or at least intimidating, such that now you’re divided from yourself by the power of fear.

How about when in one of our congregations or in a network of relations or in the whole body politic some lie gains traction, some slanderous thing, inviting a sneaking suspicion about whom and what you can trust, whether people or information, even facts and reality. Lies are incredibly divisive, misinformation, disinformation, just asking questions.

Then there’s when, in political speech, whole groups of people come to be cast out, or some essential dividing line comes to be fixed—“illegals” from law-abiding citizens, or pet-eating Haitians from “normal people,” or radical left democrat fascists from real Americans now

galvanized for a fight, or what have you for there being so many examples of this, nearly every time Trump opens his mouth some new division let loose?

Do you believe in that devil, that divisive one who wins the day through such means—not a person as such but a spirit, a mode?

You have heard it said that the gospel isn't political, that it's a matter of personal piety. But I say unto you, it can be both.

The content of the temptations: they've been read as personal, Jesus' personal strength to withstand temptation, and a likewise charge to each of us likewise to resist such temptation. His hunger would have him tempted to go ahead and make stones become bread, and his not having done so encourages our own such faithful withstanding and delaying gratification: self-control. His isolation and vulnerability would make it so he would crave the sort of political stature the devil could secure him, and his resisting such temptation encourages us not to go for vainglory but for humble service. The casting of doubt on whether he was the Son of God would have him compelled to prove he was by getting angels of God so spectacularly to save him, and his resisting this spectacle encourages each of us to function with confidence and not defensively, as if we have something to prove.

These are good lessons, stemming from a worthy reading of this encounter. I would teach them to my children. I'm trying to teach them to Rae. I'd hope to learn them myself. I do think, however, that the political implications here have far greater charge.

The power to turn stones to bread means not only saving yourself from ever being hungry but saving everyone else too—and there's hardly a better way for anyone to secure power, secure political domination, than to give away bread or otherwise food, and then occasionally to withhold it just so the people remember. This is how the Roman Empire secured their power: bread and circus, in the words of 1st century Roman poet Juvenal put it in his satirical writing, the manipulation of the masses. *Panem et circenses*, bread and games: this was what the politically powerful offered the populace to distract from the fact that they were not free, that injustice and dehumanization were rife. This is how it was done, and how it still can be done. The question here in the wilderness was whether Jesus would generate and exercise political power in this way, now that he'd be filled with so great a power as the Holy Spirit. The question is whether he'd make people his captives or rather allow them to be free.

The power of all the kingdoms of the world: this is to suggest that every kingdom, every *polis* the world has even known and will ever know belongs to a greater or lesser degree to the devil,

the divisive one (divide conquer, amiright?), is indeed secured and managed by the power of division, pitting one aspect of the populace against another, or a whole populace against a perceived outside enemy. Whether the enemy is beyond and is within, nations and peoples will always organize and understand themselves as divided from some enemy other—and the measure of societal goodness or corruption is found in how true or how fabricated the enemy other is. For it's always true in this unfinished world that an enemy might be real and truly threatening, but it's more dangerously also the case that one might be fabricated for political ends. The question here is whether Jesus would generate and exercise political power from the establishing of an enemy against which he'd lead a fight. He would, after all, have plenty of potential enemies to lead a charge—imperial, religious. The question here is whether he would.

The specular display the devil has in mind, Jesus throwing himself off the highest point of the Temple so angels might carry him to safety, this terrific show of Jesus' exalted status: is there a more effective way to get people in your thrall than to have a brush with death but then an unlikely rescue? This wouldn't just be a thrill for the one so saved but just as much so for those on the ground who want to believe in such spectacular rescue, want to align with that one in case it might rub off on them. The question is whether Jesus wanted people in his thrall or hoped for people to follow in faith, whether he wanted cultists—slavish, captured—or disciples, students in the way of peace and truth.

You have heard it said Christianity is personal, a private matter, that it should have no bearing on our public lives. But I say unto you there is no difference. Call me an old school feminist (really, please call me that): I say the personal is political, there's no clear dividing line between our personal confessions of faith and our public actions—and indeed if there is, then we're divided from ourselves in a way that could be thought diabolical. No, we can't be so easily divided from ourselves, nor should we be. How we are is who we are, which these days more pressingly than in recent decades is where our power lies, here and maybe only here.

There will be much going on in our public life that we object to and can do so very little about. So perhaps our Lenten disciplines can be evermore a matter of preparation, for when a moment might arrive or a new age might dawn and our personal convictions will demand a public playing out. What Jesus manifest in the wilderness in resisting temptations both personal and profoundly political is what we are to hope for in our whole body politic. Leaders who regard our humanity, who aim for our liberation, who seek not vainglory but equality for all, who claim not special status but take place among all the children of God: Jesus perfected this generation of

power and exercising of power in the wilderness as none other can on this earthly plane: I accept that hard fact. Yet his way should be the aim, not because it's "Christian" but because it's good, the only truly life-giving way.

We hold out hope and we resist where we must—the divisive one always looking for an opportune time. We are warned. We are charged.

Thanks be to God.