

Sermon, Pastor Mike Button
Occasion: 1 Lent Midweek
Date: March 12, 2014
Theme: The Devil: Yes or No?
Text: Matthew 4: 1-11

NRS **Matthew 4:1**

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³ The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." ⁴ But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" ⁷ Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹ and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

The Gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.

May you walk in the way of God's grace and peace all the days of your life; for the sake of Jesus the Messiah. Amen.

Last Sunday Emily Wright shared with me that the kids in children's church that morning had peppered her with questions about the devil. After hearing the story of how Jesus had been tempted by the devil, they were intrigued and wanted to know more. Who is the devil? Where is

hell? What does the devil look like? Does the devil come after people? Is there such a thing as the devil possessing someone? Is the devil real? Yes or no?

The scriptural answer is yes and no. As every child knows, we are throughout life confronted with temptations: to say something unkind, or to say nothing at all when unkind things are being said; to kick someone when they're down, or to pass by on the other side when someone is already down for the count; to take advantage of another's weakness, or to excuse our own weaknesses that we indulge at the expense of others. The catalog of temptations could easily span several thousand pages; great minds have generated long, long mega-lists of all sorts of sins, mortal and venial, deadly and grievous. But where do these temptations come from?

From a secular, scientific point of view, the modern argument has been that these temptations arise out of our own psychologically traumatized minds and imaginations. Whether as a consequence of bad environment or bigoted social conditioning, there's no question that we often perpetrate violence against others, actively and/or passively, because our moral compasses have been knocked out of whack, leading us to make bad decisions and not to recognize the consequences of our actions, both individual and corporate. But the more ancient explanation, which includes the wisdom of the Bible, is that temptations arise from more than just our warped imaginations. In our most powerful temptations, we often get a sense that we are being tempted by something or someone outside ourselves. Sometimes these experiences are so intense and pervasive that we feel like we're contending with more than flesh and blood. It's not just our neighbor tempting us; it's not just voices inside our own heads that would pull us astray; but rather, we feel like we're under attack. We feel like we're being besieged, overwhelmed even by a power strong enough to take control of our will and bend us to its own ends.

It's precisely out of such experiences that religions have posited the existence of the devil, or something like what the Bible calls the devil. Even in the Bible the language of evil is very diverse. Sometimes it's more philosophical, as when the Apostle Paul cites powers and principalities and the elemental spirits of the world. But often the Bible personifies evil with names like Satan or Beelzebul or the Father of Lies. In his own

experience of evil and its temptations, Jesus often felt, the gospels tell us, that his own soul was under attack from a personal presence that was both clever and terrifying.

I think the real question is not whether the devil exists, but rather, what is the nature of the devil's existence? Does he have horns and a cape and a pitchfork with which he shovels the souls of the damned into everlasting torment? Does he take possession of little girls and then knock around the priests or pastors who would cast him out? Those images make for great horror movies, but the problem with positing a personal devil duking it out against our very personal God is that it raises all sorts of questions about God. In the creed's First Article we confess that we believe in God the Father Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth; which is to say, everything that is has its ultimate origins in God the Father of us all. The Gospel of John goes one step further by claiming that everything that has come into being came that way by the very Word of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, who became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. And going back to Genesis, we likewise believe that the Holy Three-in-One created everything good, even very good. Though sin has scarred and distorted God's good creation, we still hold that the fundamental goodness of God's creative work remains intact, even if only barely. So how is it that there can exist a devil that is the absolute embodiment of good's opposite?

The Bible suggests – doesn't fully elaborate, but rather – suggests a couple of different ways to explore this question. Myth is how we talk about things we don't know how to talk about, and one mythic explanation for the devil's existence comes to us as a story of rebellion in the courts of heaven, elaborated most fully in the apocryphal book First Enoch. Refusing to be subject to God, angels rose up in revolt to assert their own power over against God. These angels under the leadership of Satan were cast out of heaven's light to dwell in eternal darkness from whence they viciously tempt humans to join in their war against God. In the Book of Job Satan is likewise mythically portrayed as one of God's counselors, whose job is to be the adversary, that is, the one who tests the faithfulness of God's saints, like Job. In both these representations Satan is God's creature and therefore under God's control. Because God is the Creator of all, Satan cannot exist apart from God, ruling out the possibility of any dualistic divide between any kingdom of good and

kingdom of evil. God rules everywhere, even in hell. But do we really want to say that God lets the Devil prowl about, seeking souls to devour?

That was the question the great theologian St. Augustine asked in his classic coming to faith story, *The Confessions*. Augustine had himself at one time been involved with a religious cult that divided the world into good and evil, black and white, realms of light and realms of darkness. Both the sovereignty of God and the goodness of creation convinced Augustine that this type of radical dualism could not be true. So if the devil's real, how can he/she/it exist without leading back to the dualism that's inconsistent with God's nature? Augustine came up with the brilliant idea that maybe the devil is not so much a presence as an absence, defined not so much in terms of existence as non-existence, more nothing than something. Think of it this way. You can't have light without shadow, so likewise the fullness of God posits also the empty void that is the devil. Augustine writes that the real temptation of the devil is to draw us away from the ground of our being in God and lure us into the absolute nothingness that is evil.

Oops. I think I got a little deep here, and maybe you're wondering what Emily should tell those kids about the devil. I don't think they're quite ready for Augustine, so how about good old Martin Luther. I'm sure you recall verse three of "A Mighty Fortress."

Though hordes of devils fill the land
all threat'ning to devour us,
we tremble not, unmoved we stand;
they cannot overpower us.
Let this world's tyrant rage;
in battle we'll engage!
His might is doomed to fail;
God's judgment must prevail!
One little word subdues him.

So here's what you tell the kids. Yes, there's a devil who will tempt us away from God's goodness, and when he comes around, tell him to go back to the nothingness where he belongs. If he persists, just invoke that one little word that subdues him. Jesus.