

Overcoming Satan
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
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13:45

Lent begins this Sunday on a fairly ominous note—Jesus in the wilderness being tempted by the devil. We may have trouble with the existence of the devil in this morning's scripture—we don't talk about him very much. In fact, whenever the devil appears in scripture in our Tuesday morning Bible Study here at church, we all seem perplexed, me included. I contrast my discomfort and confusion with a family friend who's an evangelical Christian, and speaks about the devil freely. She says things like, "I've been having a hard time lately, and I know it's the devil at work!"

Truthfully, religious language like this makes me uneasy. So I have opted to follow the directions of the great educator and activist Parker Palmer who says that "if the going gets rough, turn to wonder . . . if you find yourself feeling uncomfortable with the perspective offered by another, try not to allow judgment to set in. Instead, become intrigued." [1] So I turned to wonder and read a fantastic book co-authored by my former Hebrew Bible professor called *The Birth of Satan*. And I want to share some insights from *The Birth of Satan* that will help us make sense of this morning's passage, the Season of Lent in general, and what all of this means for us today.

My former professor Greg Mobley relates that with monotheism, the belief in the one true God, there was an existential crisis for God's people. In wrestling with the very nature of God, God came to be disassociated with, as Mobley says, "many of the unpleasant but necessary tasks of world management." [2] These unpleasant but necessary tasks were therefore assigned to Satan. He writes, "It would appear that, over time, an exorcism of sorts takes place; the negative aspects of YHWH are cast out and assigned to alternative beings, such as the Destroyer (Mashit), the 'smiting angel' (hammal'ak hammashit), and, of course, hassatan. Eventually, it is hassatan 'the Adversary,' who will become the embodiment of evil." [3] We use the word Satan or the Devil to label this evil adversary we see in Luke today as Jesus and the Devil go head to head in the wilderness.

In thinking about this passage, Mobley notes that Satan acts as an adversary and obstacle to Jesus' role as the Messiah. Satan presents Jesus with three obstacles or temptations—one is bread to meet Jesus' physical needs, the second is worldly power, and the third is a test of heroism. Satan forces Jesus just after he's been baptized and claimed by God to figure out what kind of Messiah he will be. [4] Satan forces Jesus to figure out who he is and what he's about before he goes out into the world to minister to God's people.

The whole scene is creepy, and Jesus and Satan quoting scripture at each other is unsettling. Don't you wonder what God's doing while these tests are taking place? Luke tells us that Jesus is full of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit is the one who leads Jesus out into the wilderness. You can't help but wonder if God is therefore having Satan do the dirty work since the Spirit of God seems to set the whole thing up. Perhaps these tests had to be administered by Satan because wouldn't it be worse if God was putting Jesus up to these tests when the poor guy is out there in the wilderness starving and alone?

This is why the stories we hear in Lent are difficult. We wonder if God required the testing, rejection, and ultimate sacrifice of Jesus, God's beloved Son. And if God required testing, rejection, and sacrifice, what does this say about God? Isn't this why this season and the stories we contemplate is difficult? We wonder if this is true, what this means for us, for our faith and our lives. It's like Mother Teresa is once quoted as saying, "I know God will not give

me anything I can't handle. I just wish [God] didn't trust me so much." We're left wondering what God does give us to handle, and is this the way God works?

I'm kind-of sorry to begin Lent with all of these tough questions this morning, questions that people of faith have been asking for thousands of years. But the season of Lent is about turning our lives around and reorienting ourselves back to God, it's about wrestling with our faith.

In thinking about the place of Satan in our faith and what this means for us, Mobley maintains that "Satan was provisional, Satan was ad hoc . . . an incomplete idea, an insufficient response to a child's question about where evil came from . . . because if God is initially, fully, and finally God, the Alpha and the Omega, then Satan is really the Beta and the Psi. Satan may have emerged before time, but not before God, and on the next to last day, Satan will be defeated." [5] He ends on a hopeful note in the midst of these difficult questions. However we conceive of the figure or concept of Satan, he will not have the final say in this story. We see this clearly in Jesus' wilderness encounter today as Jesus resists the obstacles placed in his path, and Satan is forced to depart.

So I'll end with three short lessons we can learn from the figure of Satan and Jesus' confrontation with him today. These lessons can help us reorient our lives in the face of trials and tribulations. Mobley says that stories about Satan teach us that lesson one—evil can be deceptive, lesson two—Satan never moves about in the world unopposed, and lesson three — "whether Satan is to be taken as a metaphor, as a symbolic, or literal being, Satan is real in the sense that evil is real" whether we like it or not. [6]

So lesson one—evil can be deceptive. This is really clear in Jesus' wilderness story. At the outset, it wouldn't be terrible for Jesus to eat a little bread or have power or even to prove that he's beloved and chosen by God. And yet, what does Jesus have to prove to Satan? Why should he engage in these deceptions when Satan's words are twisted and wrong, when his intentions are bad?

In our own lives, we face times when something seems too good to be true and we have a pit in our stomach about it, and maybe we should pay attention. Mobley says that "understanding Satan's forms and functions can help us to recognize that evil enters our own lives in many different shapes and sizes. And consequently, we may also recognize our own deceptive behavior as destructive, which offers the opportunity for change." [7] This is why we began Ash Wednesday with a confession of sins and why we will confess our sins every Sunday in Lent. It's the humble recognition that we make mistakes, we mess up, yes, we sin and are deceived by falsehoods. But that is not the end of the story.

Because of lesson two—Satan never moves about in the world unopposed. There is always someone there to take on the Adversary. We see this today when Jesus goes toe to toe and quotes scripture right back at Satan. The climax of Luke's story is Jesus responding to all of Satan's deceptions with, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" [8] This response points to our own wrestling with temptations and even injustice in our world, and yet having faith that God is by our side. This response points to the need to have courage in the face of trials or even hatred.

Just this week, I was struck in President Obama's State of the Union Address when he spoke about gun control and that folks most affected by gun violence in our country deserve for Congress to vote on it. He said that Hadiya Pendleton's parents, the young girl shot and killed in Chicago after performing at President Obama's Inauguration, deserve a vote. And he went on—that "Gabby Giffords, the families of Newtown, the families of Aurora, the families of Oak

Creek, and Tucson, and Blacksburg, and the countless other communities ripped open by gun violence, they deserve a simple vote." [9]

This is a good example of what we can learn about overcoming evil in the world. Stories about Satan show us today that evil never moves about in the world unopposed. For a President to call on Congress to do something about evil acts, and for Congress, members of both parties, to hopefully respond to this call shows that evil does not go about unopposed. It offers us hope on both sides of the aisle that we can overcome the shadows in our world.

And our final lesson—Satan is real in the sense that evil is real. Whether it's war or addiction or heartbreaking illnesses or families torn apart or hatred of any group, there's evil in our world. We can't deny it. It's notable that the writers of the Bible didn't try to explain evil away or deny that it exists, for evil was then and is now a reality we can't hide. Look around and you see some hard truths, but our story never ends on that note. Mobley says, "In the final analysis, the Bible reassures us that God is on our side, that the Devil can be resisted, that love wins out in the end." [10]

In this season of Lent as we journey with Jesus to the cross and beyond, as we examine our own lives, the light and the dark aspects of ourselves and our world, we must hold onto the truth of our faith—love always wins in the end. Sin, evil, Satan, however you want to speak about the shadowy side of life—never has the final say in our story. Let us keep hope in our hearts and depend on one another, and most of all on God, no matter what we face in this life. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Adapted from Parker Palmer, "Boundary Markers: Practices Which Create Safe Space."

[2] T.J. Wray and Gregory Mobley, *The Birth of Satan: Tracing the Devil's Biblical Roots*, 46.

[3] Wray and Mobley, *The Birth of Satan*, 51.

[4] Wray and Mobley, *The Birth of Satan*, 118-120.

[5] Wray and Mobley, *The Birth of Satan*, 178.

[6] Wray and Mobley, *The Birth of Satan*, 180.

[7] Wray and Mobley, *The Birth of Satan*, 179.

[8] Luke 4:12.

[9] President Barack Obama's State of the Union Address, *The Washington Post*, February 13, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/state-of-the-union-2013-president-obamas-address-to-congress-transcript/2013/02/12/d429b574-7574-11e2-95e4-6148e45d7adb_story_4.html

[10] Wray and Mobley, *The Birth of Satan*, 180.

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