

1 Lent C, 2019, OSLC

Satan. The Devil. A fiend, an adversary, as Webster's dictionary says: the personal supreme spirit of evil. Out there in the desert with Jesus. Pushing and poking at Jesus. Saying the oddest things to him. At first glance the temptations of Jesus do seem so bizarre. They seem so unlike our temptations, something we really can't relate to. The adversary whispers in Jesus' ear to take things, to use people, and to ignore God. They seem so out of the ordinary. Make bread out of stones? Leap from the temple? Worship Satan to gain the world?

I can't really conceive of these kinds of temptations being related to any kind of temptations we experience. Yet the temptations of Jesus are ours, for Satan is with us as he was with Jesus; he is with us not so much to get us to do wrong things - we need no help in that - but to develop in us life destroying attitudes and beliefs; to develop in us those things that will take us further and further away from God's love till one day we might discover that we have no faith at all, or we might start thinking that we are a people without hope and without purpose, or that we are – in short - completely misguided and misdirected - living only for today, living only for ourselves and our own wants and needs.

Satan, our adversary, talks as much to us as he did to Jesus.

And if you don't believe me, let's look at what he is saying in the temptation story that we heard in today's gospel: "If You are the Son of God ... If You are ... If You really think You are -- then can't You demonstrate Your power through a self-serving action? Do something to prove yourself"

If you are really loved by God, can't you provide evidence of God's care by leaping from the temple? If you really want to change the world - if that is your mission – can't you do it better in the way that I show you? If You are the child of God, then why can't you, why don't you...???"

Think about that voice for a minute. The voice Jesus heard as he wandered through the wilderness. You and I often walk through a type of wilderness in our own lives – the wilderness not of sand, rock, dessert cactus and bush - but the wilderness of the soul; the wilderness of a world that feels like it doesn't care - a world that doesn't provide an easy time of things – instead we often find ourselves in a coldly indifferent, if not openly hostile, place, a wilderness of our souls, where lack of hope and trust, lack of faith, abound.

How often have we heard the kind of words in ourselves that Jesus heard at the end of his forty days of wandering? How often have you heard that voice speaking inside your mind and heart - whispering quietly - but persistently: "If you really are a child of God, would you act that way?" "If you are really are a child of God -wouldn't you be able to overcome your weaknesses, do the good you intended, straighten yourself out?" "If God really loved you, would God treat you this way? Would God let you suffer or go without? "Are you really a child of God? Is God really there for you? " "Isn't there an easier way? A better way? Better than this. Better than now?"

If you are like me, the voice of Satan is the voice of suspicion which takes two major forms - doubt in the goodness of God (repeat)- and "self-doubt", the doubt that questions who we are and what we are about - not for the purpose of improving ourselves or causing us to turn to God, but self doubt for the particular purpose of tearing down whatever good that may have been built up in us and causing us to wonder if there is any point in our continuing to live trying to be faithful.

Too often temptation raises its ugly head. Too often I give in to it. Maybe that's true for you too.

I think you all here know the feeling -You promise God that you will pray more often: - and you find yourself so busy – working - watching TV - running to meetings, doing this and that; and when you look back you see that you ended up praying less than you had hoped to. You promise God that you will not be so impatient or angry with the annoying people in your life - and you find yourself, a few days later, disgusted and disagreeing with them.. You try to do something - or to not do something and you fail - and you feel guilty about it - you feel that you are a failure. Or you might feel like you've fallen short of the goal once again.

Have you ever said to yourself: "If I was really who I believe myself to be - then I would not be this way?"

Self doubt - soul destroying doubt. It is a more common thing than we realize. Like the other doubt that Satan throws at us - the doubt that says to you when you are in distress: "If God really cared, then why are you n this mess?".

But let me tell you: God does care. God cares. God cares for you.

And still temptation is a reality in the Christian life.

Why? Because Satan does not want us to succeed at being God's people. **Satan does not want us to succeed at being God's people.** It is said that the devil never attacks those who are already on his side.

God wants us to choose Him freely. God wants us to be whole human beings who freely love God, and others, in order to become people who in every way grow to learn how much we are made in God's Image. And that requires something from us.

The story goes like this: There was once a man who was asleep one night in his cabin when suddenly his room filled with light and Jesus appeared. The Lord told the man that God had work for him to do, and showed him a large rock in front of his cabin. The Lord explained that the man was to push against the rock with all his might. This the man did, day after day. For many years he toiled from sun up to sun down, his shoulders set squarely against the cold, massive surface of the unmoving rock, pushing with all his might. Each night the man returned to his cabin sore and worn out, feeling that his whole day had been spent in vain. Nothing much had been accomplished.

Seeing that the man was showing signs of discouragement, Satan decided to enter the picture placing thoughts into the man's mind such as; "You have been pushing against that rock for a long time and it hasn't budged. Why kill yourself over this? You are never going to move it!" Satan said many other things like this, giving the man the impression that the task was impossible and that he was a failure and silly for even trying to follow Christ's request.

These thoughts discouraged and dismayed and tired the man even more. "Why kill myself over this?" he thought. "I'll just put in my time, giving just the minimum of effort and that will be good enough." And that he planned to do until one day he decided to make it a matter of prayer and take his troubled thoughts to the Lord. "Lord" he said, "I have worked long and hard in your service, putting all my

strength to do that which you have asked. Yet, after all this time, I have not even budged that rock a quarter of an inch. I haven't made an ounce of difference. What is wrong? Why am I failing?"

To this the Lord responded compassionately, "My friend, when long ago I asked you to serve me and you accepted, I told you that your task was to push against the rock with all your strength, which you have done. Never once did I mention to you that I expected you to move the rock.

Your task was to push, to make the effort. And now you come to me, your spirit troubled, thinking that you have failed. But, is that really so? Look at yourself. Your arms are strong and muscled, your back brown & tanned, your hands are strong and capable from constant pushing, and your legs have become powerful and solid. Through opposition you have grown much and your abilities now surpass that which you used to have. Yet you haven't moved the rock. YOUR CALLING, continued the Lord, WAS TO BE FAITHFUL, TO PUSH AND TO EXERCISE YOUR BELIEF AND TRUST IN ME. This you have done. I, my friend, will now move the rock."

How like that man we are. Each of us is also called to be faithful, to push & stretch & exercise our belief and to trust in God. In doing this it is not a failing or a weakness to be tempted or to question. It is not a sign that we are lost, that we are beyond hope, when temptation overtakes us and we do those things we should not do and fail to do those things we should. For that to be so would mean that the cross of Christ was for no purpose and that his sacrifice on our behalf means nothing.

And that most certainly is not the case. God's word does not come back to God empty. God's love is not without power and impact and effect.

What God wants from us is not that we are perfect - but that we give life our best shot - and keep on trying. Pushing & stretching and exercising our faith in ways we haven't even thought about before. All the while having hope, and faith, and trust, in God.

What the devils, the adversaries, in the world want is that we give up - for they have no victory when we keep the faith. I can't help but think that the devils of our lives want us to stay discouraged and maybe even give up entirely so that we abandon faith in God and walk away from the church and give up on the idea and truth that we are made in God's image for a purpose and a reason. We are made in God's image for a purpose and a reason!

God is on our side - the devil is not.

Do not give up faith in God because of the temptations you experience – especially not the ones you give in to - but instead get up on your feet, turn afresh to God, and begin once again, exercising your faith, pushing it to new understandings and practices, taking Lent seriously.

That, my friends, is what God asks us to do.

Amen.