

## Speak of the Devil....

[Texts - Genesis 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11]

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There are some preachers who, for some reason, like to talk a *lot* about evil, sin, and the devil. During my pastoral internship in Marietta, Ohio, I actually heard a preacher boast that, "Before I came to this church, the members really didn't know very much about the devil!" [Apparently, his presence helped them learn how the Prince of Darkness really operates!] Ironically, this church was called the Grace Gospel Fellowship, which is why I decided to visit there one evening. Unfortunately, that preacher proclaimed little *grace* and absolutely no *gospel*. His message conveyed only *bad news*, as he talked primarily about the power of the devil, the depravity of man, and pounded home the image of a tyrannical and terrifying god.

In contrast to this, the message of Jesus Christ **is** the *Gospel* - the *Good News* of a gracious and giving God. And even though Jesus, at times, does talk about sin and the devil, the overwhelming emphasis of his teaching - and his life - is the abundant love and grace that God extends to all people. In Jesus' message, and in his person, the power of Divine compassion and care is fully embodied and freely expressed. So when Jesus *does* speak of the devil, or encounters evil, he focuses on the Power and Promise of Divine Love to overcome evil, rather than "giving the devil [*more*] than his due!"

In this morning's New Testament reading, we hear the story of how Jesus faces temptation, and ultimately prevails. This stands in sharp contrast to our reading from *Genesis*, which tells how Adam and Eve fall away from Divine Grace, by giving in to the tempter. And while both of these stories may seem radically different from the type of temptations you or I might encounter, I think there's something in both stories that is common to the temptations we *do* face - a couple common features that are found at the root of all forms of temptation. And perhaps, by recognizing those features, you and I will be able to better understand - and withstand - those things that tempt us to fall away from living fully and faithfully.

One major theme in this morning's temptation stories, is *doubt*. In the Garden of Eden, the Serpent plants the seed of doubt, by asking, "Why

would God say 'You shall not eat from the Tree of Knowledge? What's God trying to keep from you? Why isn't God giving you the full story concerning what's best for you?' And in the wilderness, the Tempter attempts to cultivate that same seed of doubt in Jesus' mind: "*If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread - after all, why would God want you to go hungry?....If you are God's Chosen Child, then take a dive off the top of the Temple and prove it - If you're really sure that God will watch-out for you!*"

To me, it makes sense that doubt - and the insecurity which often accompanies it - play a significant part in the Biblical stories of temptation. I know when I'm feeling doubtful or insecure about myself, my relationships with others, or my connection to God, that's when I'm most susceptible to temptation. It's probably because my focus isn't on God, or others, but on my own personal needs or fears - and the desire to protect and take care of myself - even though it might mean doing harm, or trying to force my own will, on those around me.

According to Scripture, *temptation* often begins with the notion that our Creative, Life-giving Source isn't really on our side - as if the Majestic Mystery behind this entire Cosmos started it all just to mess with us, and make our lives difficult and demanding! And if that's the case, then it's quite logical that we would want to have all the power and possessions we can grab, in order to take care of ourselves and protect our lives. So the Serpent says to the woman, "If you eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, you will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you *will be like God!* So you go for it girl, and grab that power!" And the tempter says to Jesus: "Why not exercise your power, by commanding these stone to become bread..or by joining with me and sharing in the mighty splendor of all the world's kingdoms...or by jumping off the temple, and *forcing* God to send angels to protect you, for so it is written in the Scriptures!"

I think it's quite telling, that the temptation to pull Jesus from the Divine Path of self-giving service, is wrapped in a direct quote from Holy Scripture - Psalm 91:12. Apparently, even the *Bible* can be used in the temptation to grab for power and control. So maybe those passages that promote sexism and slavery, homophobia and bigotry, or the complete annihilation of ones enemies, need to be reevaluated! Perhaps those passages that encourage heavy-handed power and control, rather than heavenly peace and

compassion, aren't exactly what God had in mind! And maybe, as followers of Jesus Christ, you and I need to faithfully decide which parts of the Bible actually reflect a Christ-like message of compassion and grace, and respectfully reject the rest - just like Jesus rejects the temptation to grab onto those Scripture passages that would sanction his controlling and ruling others, rather than comforting and redeeming them.

Throughout his life, Jesus certainly sees plenty of business, political, and religious leaders who are far more interested in gaining power over people's lives, than in helping them. He knows how power can tempt and corrupt even those who may begin with the best of intentions. So in that wilderness, as he prepares to begin his public ministry, Jesus determines that he will not give in to the temptation of power. Instead, he will humbly go about doing good - by performing acts of kindness, compassion, and service. For Jesus, being a genuine Child of God means letting *God* be God, and trusting that his life and the lives of all those around him are ultimately in the loving and capable care of our Creative, Life-giving Source.

It is this deep-seated belief, that allows Jesus to let go of his own need for power and prestige, and to take-on the role of a humble servant: One who can freely love and care, touch and heal, give and forgive. And when the time comes to choose between facing death, or abandoning that Divine message of all-inclusive love to the religious power-brokers, Jesus once again trusts in that never-ending love of God. The *Good News* of our Faith, is that even when the forces of fear, evil, and death claim Jesus' life, the greater power of Eternal Love and Life re-claim him - breaking the grip of death, and opening the way to everlasting life for all God's children.

What this can mean for you and me today, is that no matter how tempting it may be to give in to the desire to control and protect our lives, we, too, can let God be God! We can trust that the undying power of Divine Love will ultimately keep *us* safe and secure. When we do this, we will find the courage and strength to overcome those alluring temptations that come our way. We will joyfully believe, and fully claim the *Good News*: That we are *all* God's beloved children! And as sisters and brothers, we will strive to treat one another with respect and kindness, openness and understanding, patience and love. The bottom line is, you and I *can* choose compassion and peace, over control and power. This is the Way of Jesus Christ; this is the higher path that leads us not into temptation, but delivers us from evil.