

“I refuse to live in your world! You will not define me!” Could it be that this is what Jesus is in essence saying to the so-called devil when he responds to the three temptations in the wilderness? Let me get back to that after we clarify some of the key words in our text. What do you associate with the word *devil*? The Greek word “diabolos” is derived from the preposition “dia” - *across* and the verb “ballein” - *to throw*. At some level, the devil is simply a force that throws us for a loop, throws something across our way so that we stumble, get off track, get confused.

“Diabolos” is used to translate the Hebrew word “Satan” which is commonly translated as *accuser* or *slanderer*. I associate *slander* with the intentional use of misinformation. Someone using slander intentionally misrepresents someone’s intentions or actions. It usually includes an accusation or judgment. And what do we make of the word “temptation?” The Greek word “peirazein” can refer to numerous things. It can simply mean *trying out whether something can be done, testing it out, examining it*. It can be a kind of test used for constructive or for malicious purposes. Putting all that together, I would say that Jesus is encountering a force in our story that is trying to throw him off balance. The *devil* is actually trying to get Jesus to test God in ways that would misrepresent God’s love and intentions for our lives. More on that later.

I think we tend to think of temptations as whatever tries to get us to so-called “sin.” I think we further tend to associate “sin” with doing or thinking the morally wrong thing, something that God does not want us to do. There is something to that. The Greek word “hamartia” has to do with *missing the mark*. We are setting out with a goal and we don’t make it. Think of an archer whose arrow does not hit the bullseye or maybe does not even hit one of the rings of the target. For example, we are promising to be faithful and present in our relationships and have an affair or lie or get so wrapped up in ourselves that we don’t make the time to be there for others. We want to honor our bodies and nevertheless eat and drink what is not good for us. The actions we call sins are basically symptoms of a deeper dis-ease and sense of separation that we might call sin. We struggle to trust that we are and will be Ok at our deepest core. We struggle to trust although God, the

ground of our being, is actually there to catch us. Sin is primarily about relationship.

I think much of what we might describe as sins emerge from a human, though too often misguided looking to feel safe, in control, special and securely loved in the wrong places and ways. Isn't much our societal striving based on achieving these? For example, I am struck by how often interviews with people about why they vote for a specific candidate are based on securing one or two issues they worry about. Most often it seems to be jobs and doing what it takes to secure those jobs and livelihoods.

I am also struck by how much our news has been dominated by stories that relate to people trying to get a leg up, trying to control or manipulate people or their environment. The news is full of allegations and investigations about potential fraud, collusion, corruption, money-laundering, abuses of power, illegal pay-offs, and outcries against the unequal treatment of white-collar crimes. Such behaviors also play a role in the migration to our southern borders. On International women's day, we heard much about how women are still being treated as commodities, paid less for equal work and not acknowledged or supported as they engage in much of the unpaid or underpaid work of care-giving. We continue to be inundated with news of how much children and women have been and continue to be sexually exploited, even in the churches. Domination and exploitation continue to haunt our human relationships and our relationship to the wider creation of which we are a part.

Our culture also grooms us to have to be special. Although some competition can be fun and energizing depending on the spirit behind it, it seems that we are constantly told that we have to be number one. A town has to be the most beautiful in the country. When US and one Canadian team play each other in a baseball league, we insist on calling the winner the World Champions. The USA has to be the best country in the world, have the greatest military, the biggest say in world politics and economics. TV shows thrive on survivors, superheroes, super athletes, best singers, best dancers. We keep lists of who are the richest people and too often measure our well-being by how financially secure or materially

wealthy we are. All these things are interrelated and show how much we are struggling with who we really are, what makes us feel safe, in control, special and beloved.

In our story, Jesus is invited into this struggle, to look for the quick fix and to test or try out whether God has what it takes to keep Jesus feeling safe, in control, special and beloved. Jesus has just been baptized by the Holy Spirit and heard the words spoken: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with You I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22b). The same empowering Spirit now leads Jesus into the wilderness. He is in the desert for forty days to parallel the forty years the Hebrew people spent in the wilderness after being freed from slavery in Egypt. They struggled with their newfound freedom, started worshipping idols again, and did plenty of doubting despite God’s continued presence and providence. They kept coming close to returning to a life of slavery by their own volition.

Jesus has been fasting from everything exterior that could give him a sense of safety and security. The devil waits until Jesus is totally famished before “he” says: “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Notice how the *devil* says “if,” putting the relationship with God in question.¹ Is this God really there? Does God really care for you? What kind of God is this? Can you trust this God? Don’t you want to check out if this God is trustworthy and if you are really God’s Son, Jesus? Doesn’t being the Son mean that God should provide you with the power to take care of your every need, Jesus? Why don’t you try it out? Prove it! Let’s see what God has got! However, Jesus does not go for the bait but responds by saying, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

For one thing, Jesus knows that although our need for physical sustenance is real, we all have a deeper hunger that only God can still. We hunger to feel like we belong in our deepest being. Jesus won’t let the *devil* tempt him into thinking that he must secure his well-being on his own. Jesus already trusts that the God who offered manna in the wilderness intends that there should be bread enough for all. And like the Hebrews were told to just take what they needed for the day, so Jesus

¹ We have a conundrum here because Jesus as the Christ is the second person of the Trinity and is therefore also God. In our incarnational story, Jesus is fully human and fully divine. More on this in other sermons.

tells us to ask each day anew for what will sustain us. We lack the imagination that there could possibly be enough to go around and people do go hungry. There is enough to go around but our hearts need to grow to believe it and live by this truth. We make the world our hearts can inhabit smaller than it is. We might even say that Jesus chooses poverty and solidarity with the hungry over grasping.

Next, Jesus is tempted to accept power over all the kingdoms of the earth in exchange for allegiance to a seductive presence that uses power only to secure self-interest. “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I will give it to anyone I please. If you then, will worship me, it will be all yours (Luke 4:7).” The devil pretends to have been given all this authority, presumably by God. This time, the “if” comes with the demand to worship the one who thrives on lording it over others. Jesus knows God too well to trust that God would hand over authority to anyone who would grasp and asserts power and control for his or her own purposes. The image the *devil* projects of God is slanderous. Jesus refuses to be part of any action or, I would add to that, any system - economic or otherwise, that allows some to rule over and exploit others. To base one’s identity in such authority is to betray God’s trust. Again, so much of what we do is the result of us barking up the wrong tree about what makes us strong and secure and gives our lives meaning.

Finally, Jesus is tempted to test whether Jesus is really special to God. This time, the devil quotes scripture and pretends to have God’s purposes at heart. Will God indeed come to his aid in time of danger as is promised by the psalmist? Once again, Jesus refuses to do anything other than to trust that his worth and dignity is an inherent gift of God. Jesus refuses to free himself from the vulnerability we all experience. We do hit out feet against rocks, don’t we? Loved ones die. We get sick. We lose a job. A marriage end. Our kids struggle to find their way. Who here has not struggled with such experiences? Whether we can imagine and trust that God is uplifting us and carrying us even in the midst of our struggle is the deeper and more existential question. It can only be answered in a kind of trust that is free from thinking that we could gain or lose God’s presence based on anything we can do. It is a trust that knows that we belong to God whether we live or whether we die (Romans 8).

In a way, we all have time to spend in the desert to remember who and whose we are. Our challenges may vary. Maybe you learned to base your relationship with God on an “if.” If you come to church and give of yourself, God will protect you from all harm and if God doesn’t, the deal is off. Maybe you carry an old guilt for a wrong you have done and are a prisoner to your own shame. Maybe you were deeply hurt when you were young and have internalized a message that you are not lovable and keep giving in to voices that tell you are not worthy of love. Maybe you learned early on to think that you have to rely only on your own prowess and wit to make it in life. Maybe you have come to believe that your body has to look a certain way. Maybe deep down you have come to believe that your gender, race, sexual orientation or race or your hard work ought to give you certain privileges regardless of the consequences to others. Maybe you have come to believe that you are what you make of yourself materially and your sense of worth ebbs and peaks alongside the stock market. Maybe you think that your loyalty has to be primarily to your country or a specific club or some human you admire or to a drug that makes you feel good for the moment, regardless of the cost.

Whatever it may be that holds us prisoner, Lent is an invitation toward freedom. Let us not miss this opportunity to take time to observe the deeper longings that are behind your actions and thoughts. Let us notice where God’s intentions for us are being misrepresented. Let us notice the ways we are thrown for a loop by the assumptions and demands of our culture or circle circles to trust that something other than the love of God has the final authority over who and whose we are. We may not be able to meditate in the desert for forty days but we can ask for the grace to become more mindful and attentive.

Jesus leads the way in full solidarity with us as a struggling humans. He promises to be there with us in the deserts of our own making. Jesus is committed to risking everything for and with God in solidarity with you and me. We may get thrown for a loop in our lives but, as Julian of Norwich wrote, “Our falling does not stop his loving us” (Chapter 39 *Showings*). It is our honesty about what makes us fall that can open us to experiencing the healing love Christ brings. Let us not be afraid to meet him in the desert and to surrender to the deeper teachings of God’s

transformative love, compassion, and solidarity as sources of security and belovedness. May the Holy Spirit grant us a deeper trust in this power that we, too, can say to the so-called devil: “I refuse to live in your world! You will not define me!” Amen.