

“Giving Up the Devil for Lent”
Matthew 4:1-11
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The Friday morning Men’s Bible Study at my last church was as wonderful a group of Christians as you would want to meet, a group of believers supportive of one another, faithful in their reading of Scripture, and dedicated to the church. It was a joy to get up even on cold snowy mornings in Minnesota and share coffee, doughnuts, and Scripture with these fine gentlemen. Participating in this Bible Study did have one little drawback, however. You see, despite their knowledge of Scripture and their broad experiences of faith, it seemed like more often than not, and no matter what the passage, the conversation would always seem to end up focusing on one of two topics, either the motivations of Judas or the manipulations of the Devil, two topics for which I do not have very much patience. To this bunch, it seemed like every choice faced by Christians in their daily lives could, in the end, be related to either the betrayer, the tempter, or both. To this day, I am not sure what drove this phenomenon, but I have heard that the Devil is now being considered for membership in the Holy Trinity, as a replacement for the Holy Spirit, at least if the amount of conversation among Christians is any measure of the Devil’s popularity. Of course, I say this in jest, but it has been my experience conversing with, and overhearing, Christians of many generations and many

denominations, that the topic, and the perceived influence of, the Devil seem to be far more interesting and powerful in their lives than God's Holy Spirit, not to mention God's grace.

The influence of the tempter has been immortalized, of course, in the famous expression, "The Devil made me do it," a statement that we learn from tonight's passage from Matthew did not originate with Jesus. Indeed, as we see in the story of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness, the Devil's *modus operandi* is not compulsion but invitation, not coercion but challenge. The Devil is an opportunist, not an initiator. In the Biblical story, there is never a question of human beings being forced to do something by the Devil, only whether or not we choose what the Devil has to offer. But despite that Biblical witness, the idea that "The Devil *made* me do it," lingers in the forefront of public consciousness and exerts a kind of fatalistic pressure on us that makes it a lot easier to sin. Perhaps the Devil's greatest feat is to convince us that we have no choice in the matter, and that resistance is futile, that we will all be assimilated into the evil which is personified in this character we call the Devil. It is not victory enough for the Devil that we sin; the devil gives us the opportunity to deny our responsibility for our own actions by claiming some kind of inevitable inability to resist, and we take it.

By now, you may be saying to yourself, "Well, that's silly, of course I

choose to sin. That is just a saying. The Devil doesn't *make* me do anything." But given our preoccupation with the Devil, the kind I described from my days in Minnesota, and the kind I have witnessed here in Costa Rica as well, I wonder if the devil's payoff isn't the same. You see, if I can attribute all my inclinations to sin and evil to an ever-present devil who is always tempting me, then I can spend all my time trying to resist the devil, and blaming the devil for keeping me chasing my own tail, and never get around to dealing with my own sin and evil, much less the sin and evil in the world. And then I have ended up in the same place as if I believed the devil made me do it, giving over to the devil the power and trust and belief which is reserved only for my God. If it weren't for the power of the almighty dollar, I would go so far as to say that an overdeveloped belief in the personification of evil we call the Devil is the pre-eminent idolatry of our times. I am not suggesting that the presence of sin and evil in the world is a fiction, far from it. But what I am suggesting is that the highly personalized contemporary conception of the Devil is a very convenient excuse to avoid taking a look at the very difficult question of evil in the world, and our roles, individually and collectively in that evil. Instead of giving the devil too much credit in our lives, we'd get a lot more mileage out of owning up to our own shortcomings and failures and coming to terms with them. Instead of saying "The devil made me do

it,” let’s be truthful and say “the Johnnie Walker Red made me do it,” or “My need for a Park Avenue penthouse made me do it,” or the “collapse of Wall Street made me do it,” anything to get us back into the real world of sin and evil so that we can begin to confront those things which do violence to ourselves and others.

A preoccupation with the Devil skews our perception of the world, and of the Biblical worldview that should be shaping that perception. Indeed, that preoccupation makes us read tonight’s story as the “Temptation of Jesus,” rather than what it really is, the “Testing of Jesus in preparation for ministry.” What takes place in the story is not really what we usually understand as temptation, for what we usually associate with that word is being tempted to choose that which is wrong or bad or sinful over that which is good or right or godly. The word “temptation” usually conjures up the idea of a moral dilemma, and Hollywood has filled our minds with images of a devil hovering over one shoulder and an angel over the other, each whispering in our ears trying to convince us to do it their way. But this story isn’t like one of those movie scenes because the testing here is of a different kind, the kind used to determine the depth and integrity of one’s commitment to God, rather than resisting what we already know is bad for us. In this regard it is similar to Abraham’s testing when he is commanded to sacrifice his only son Isaac, or the testing that the sore-covered Job went through. In the book of Job, when the

heavenly beings have gathered together, it is God who says to the Satan, ‘Have you considered my servant Job?’ And here in Matthew, following Jesus’ baptism, it is the Spirit who leads Jesus to be tempted. Then, in both stories, the Satan comes into the picture and puts the protagonists to the test that both will pass, neither being willing to deny God in the face of what confronts them. It should not be so hard to believe that God is testing Jesus. After all, God tested most of the Biblical greats, not in the sense of trying to lead them to sin, but to plumb the depth of their integrity and commitment, and to prepare them for what lay ahead as God’s missionaries or messengers.

For a little more evidence that this is not temptation in the traditional sense, consider that in this story, there is not even an evil to be chosen. As I said, most of the time when we think about temptation, it is in terms of choosing greed or avarice or one of the other seven deadly sins, or forsaking another for our own gain. But here is a case in which the things that the Satan offers Jesus are not bad things, and in fact, they are good! The solution to worldwide hunger, the security of God’s divine favor, the chance to make things once again the way God intended them before Adam and Eve began blaming one another, these are all the wonderful things that Jesus is offered, and yet, he declines them. Far from choosing the lesser of two evils, Jesus chooses the greater of two goods, and with that choice, grace

over goodness. Clearly what Satan had to offer would have been good for Jesus and good for us, and in a way I'm sorry he didn't go for it, because there is no one I'd rather have ruling the world than Jesus, and if there were anyone up to the task of handling all the temptation that comes with ruling the world, it would be him. But from that perspective, I would have failed the test, choosing not the greater of the two goods, but the good which seems to make life less complicated and messy, the predetermined and inevitable good in which I can blissfully leave all the responsibility to someone else. And so I am grateful that he passed the test I could not, for the crux of the test was to determine Jesus' willingness to carry through with the mission God had given him, to be the Messiah, fully human, fully divine, whom God would use to save us. The opportunity that God, rather than the Devil, puts before Jesus is the chance to deny his humanity, the very thing for which he came to the manger in Bethlehem and would end up on Calvary. If Jesus turns those stones into bread, is rescued by angels before he breaks his neck on the ground, and becomes the king of the world, he turns his back on his humanity and becomes just another supernatural being among all the rest of the gods of the age.

What Jesus does by refusing all the good that is placed before him, is to continue in his radical solidarity with us, to affirm that we human beings, and indeed all creation, have value in God's eyes even if we don't really deserve it.

And this is grace in a nutshell, that God loves us even though we don't usually choose the greater of two goods, and would send God's only son to make things right. The problem is that if Jesus takes the devil's offer, there is none of that grace, because grace comes only through our faith in God through the sacrifice of Christ, a sacrifice which could not have occurred without the very human suffering and death of Jesus. It was *our* salvation, not that of Jesus, that was at stake in the wilderness, but Jesus passed the test and came out prepared to undertake his active ministry, the ministry which begins in Matthew immediately following this episode.

I want to suggest that the "testing of Jesus" story looks very different when we put the devil in the background where he belongs. It goes from being a great battle of cosmic forces to a revealing episode of grace, a transformation which may seem a little ho-hum, but which, in the end, means a whole lot more. It takes Jesus out of the superhuman category, as the fantastic superhero who, and who alone, can withstand the wiles of the devil, and puts him into the simply human category where God wants him. Do not misunderstand me, Jesus is as fully divine as he is fully human, but he is not to be understood as some kind of superhuman, for this defeats the whole logic and mystery of the incarnation. The practical application of this is that when we, in our own spiritual lives, put the devil in the background

where it belongs, we no longer need to be superhuman in our efforts to do battle with cosmic powers greater than ourselves. We are free then to simply be human beings, and to tackle the problems of human beings which we have been responsible for creating, to love and cherish one another, and to accept the grace of God when, in our humanity, we aren't able to discern which is the greater of two goods. If there is an ever-present, always-tempting devil in my life, I'll trust in God to protect me from it while I concentrate on the sin and evil in the world which I am freed through the sacrifice of Christ to do something about, especially the sin and evil which begins with me.

And so, if you want to give up something for Lent, as is the practice for some in these forty days preceding Easter, if you want to give up something for Lent, try giving up the devil and taking on a role in doing something about whatever makes you sad or mad or despairing. If you want to give up something for Lent, try giving up the devil and taking on an examination of your spending habits to see where they are contributing to the poverty and injustice we so easily blame on the devil. If you want to give up something for Lent, try giving up the devil and taking on a leadership role in our congregation so that this church can move forward and become all that God wants it to be. If you want to give up something for Lent, try giving up the devil and joining up with some other ordinary

and faithful human beings doing their best to follow Jesus Christ and bring some peace into a world which so desperately needs some. Friends, life is hard enough without the devil! This Lent, may God free us from too much belief in the devil and reveal to us in ever fuller measure the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ through the power of the true third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. Amen.