

## The Good in Sin

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The First Sunday in Lent  
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Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-21; Matthew 4:1-11

“The tempter came to him and said, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’” -- Matthew 4:3

Today is the first Sunday in Lent, the traditional moment in the church’s calendar when we showcase three things ordinarily not in the spotlight: the devil, temptation, and Jesus’ resistance to both.

Let’s begin with the devil, that personification of evil in the Bible that we who put the folk in folk religion so often turn into a cartoon. We tend to put horns on the devil, a tail on the other end, and a pitchfork in his hand, turning Satan into a cultural joke.

Scripture handles the devil differently. Scripture takes the devil seriously – he’s identified by three different names in just these few verses in Matthew – and scripture takes the devil seriously because scripture takes evil seriously, which we, by and large, do not.

We tend to trivialize evil. How? By normalizing it. We accept sin and brokenness as the way of our fallen world. In the phrase of the moment, we shrug and say, “It is what it is,” with the unspoken admission of defeat that accompanies those words.

Today’s reading will have none of that – none of that defeatism, none of that trivialization, none of that capitulation to the objective reality of evil. The story of Jesus’ temptation is a story of struggle and it is also a story of victory – his and ours. He is our model in all things, including our struggles with temptation, and three of the four evangelists saw fit to include this story of his struggle with and victory over temptation precisely to telegraph to us the message, loud and clear, that just as he did, so can we do also. Temptation is a game we can win.

Oscar Wilde famously said that he could resist everything except temptation, and although he was clever he wasn’t particularly moral, and morality is the theme of the day. Temptation is about our ability to maintain our morality when we are tempted not to. And the reason we are tempted to be immoral, I would suggest, is not because of evil, but rather, and perhaps surprisingly, because of good. Very few of us sin because we like evil; most of us sin because we like good, and it is our misguided actions in pursuit of good that lead us most often into the stinging nettles of sin.

Let’s take that gravest of sins, war. Now, we don’t think of war as sin. Any war that we Americans are engaged in, by definition, is a just war because we don’t fight unjust wars, or so we tell ourselves. Not once, as far as I know, has there ever been a national day of repentance because we, as a people, declared that the war we had just waged was wrong. Not after any of the Indian wars, not after the Mexican-American War, not after the Spanish-American War, not after the Philippine-American War, not after the Vietnam War, not after the War in Afghanistan, not after the Iran-Iraq War – not after a single military conflict has America ever admitted that we were wrong.

And the reason we don’t admit we’re wrong is because of the good that we claimed – and in most cases believed – we were pursuing in each of those conflicts. War is the preeminent and most tragic instance of sinning in the pursuit of good. We kill millions of living creatures, we destroy cultural

monuments and memory, and we lay waste to God's creation, all in pursuit of some political good that we consider greater than all those evils. We do it time and again and justify it to ourselves as the tragic necessity of pursuing the lesser of two evils.

The story of Jesus' temptation – especially that last temptation – tells me that we pursue righteousness by doing just that – pursuing righteousness, not the lesser of two or three or seventeen evils. The path to righteousness is righteousness itself; you don't take the path of evil to get to good. That was the offer the devil was tempting Jesus with in that final temptation. I will give you control over the entire world, the devil said to Jesus – and what a wonderful thing that would have been! – if you will hand over your ultimate loyalty to me. The path to your sovereignty over earth, Jesus, leads through the worship of me. That's the devil's temptation, and were it not for the enormous good embedded in that sin, it would have been no temptation at all. Jesus would never have worshipped the devil simply for its own sake, and the devil knew that. The only reason the devil's offer is even remotely tempting – and it must have been very tempting indeed to someone who loved the world as much as God Incarnate loved it – was because of the enormous good Jesus might have done had he been in charge of the world.

That, today's reading from Matthew suggests to me, is the key to understanding temptation. When you want to get a handle on your temptations, don't focus on the evil – that's too obvious and it's too easy. Focus instead on the good embedded in the evil. That's what you need to free yourself from if you want to resist temptation. Our first parents didn't fall from grace pursuing a rotten egg; they fell from grace, that lovely Genesis myth tells us, by pursuing a fruit that was good for food, was a delight to the eyes, and was to be desired to make one wise. There's not a thing wrong with any of those traits! Food, beauty, wisdom – all goods. But pursuing those goods in the wrong way – in disobedience to a simple, single command from a loving and generous God – that made all the disastrous difference.

As we set out on our Lenten journey together, my dear friends, and as we reflect in a sustained way on what it means to resist those dragging temptations that impede our spiritual growth, I'd ask you to focus less on the sin in your life and more on the good embedded in that sin. Ask yourself, day and night if you have to, if there isn't some way to pursue the good you want without, as Psalm 1 puts it, walking in the way of sinners. The story of Jesus' temptation suggests to me that the answer to that question will always be yes.