

February 21, 2010 – First Sunday in Lent “Who the Devil is That?”

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91; Luke 4:1-13

There seems to be very little gray area in people’s reactions when it comes to the season of Lent. Folks either really like it or turn their noses up at it. Those in the “like” category view it as an opportunity for deeper spiritual commitment, a chance to focus on an intense period of preparation, a time to draw nearer to God through a disciplined approach in hopes of fostering a deeper sense of connection and peace as they journey toward Easter. They may even think of it as the price to pay in order for the reward of glorious Easter Day.

Those who wrinkle their noses may consider it a waste of time, or a temporary experience with little long-lasting significance. They might **also** feel the need to grow spiritually but regard the Lenten season as a thin replacement for a more permanent experience. They might even seek the same end, but feel the season a bit of gimmick in order to get there. Some are even a bit put off by the intense penitential aspect of the season feeling that God has forgiven and will continue to forgive – so what’s all the fuss about?

It’s difficult to know how to approach Lent or how to enter the season given our post-modern understanding of religion and how that is often in tension with our spiritual longings. Our more progressive approach to religion and God’s relationship with us seems often to be at odds with Lent’s focus on sin and repentance. I mean, if God has created me as a beloved child, how can I be so awful so as to repeatedly seek God’s grace? And so I struggle with the whole thing personally **and** as your pastor in guiding you as we enter, once again, this long and oft times dreary season.

The Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor describes this dilemma looking back to Lent’s origins. She says, “Do not bother looking for Lent in your Bible dictionary, because there was no such thing back then. There is some evidence that the early Christians fasted forty hours between Good Friday and Easter, but the custom of spending forty days in prayer and self-denial did not arise until later, when the initial rush of Christian adrenaline was over and believers had gotten very ho-hum about their faith.

When the world did not end as Jesus himself had said it would, his followers stopped expecting so much from God or from themselves. They hung their wooden crosses on the wall and settled back into their more or less comfortable routines, remembering their once passionate devotion to God the way they remembered the other enthusiasms of their youth. Oh, to be young again, and to believe everything is possible.

Little by little, Christians became devoted to their comforts instead; the soft couch, the flannel sheets, the leg of lamb roasted with rosemary. These things made them feel safe and cared for – if not by God, then by themselves. They decided there was no contradiction between being comfortable and being Christian, and before long it was very hard to pick them out from the population at large. They no longer distinguished

themselves by their bold love for one another. They did not get arrested for championing the poor. They blended in. They avoided extremes. They decided to be nice instead of holy and God moaned out loud.¹

So, how **do** we get it right? What **do** we do? What would make sense? How might we approach this season with integrity, honestly deepening our spiritual lives without gimmick or technique or self-loathing?

Reading today's gospel lesson may give you even greater pause – or it just might provide the avenue we need.

Typically when I read this passage, which appears every year at the beginning of Lent, I have to admit, I cringe. Who will believe this stuff, I wonder? How do we make any sense of a passage where **the devil** plays a primary role? Who the devil is that, anyway?

When I was a kid, much like God, the devil had some sort of personification or distinct image – you know, firey red, with horns and a three-pronged pitch fork, a long tale with a sort of triangular-shaped end. A moustache and goat-tee and a sly smirk all added to the “devilish” look that struck fear into my heart. But as I got older, the devil, along with Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny seem to fade from reality. Oh, I can still conjure the picture very clearly in my mind, but the reality of separateness – an outside “evil” force dangling temptations before me so that I might fail seems contrary to the nature of God. Yet I'm still left with the question, “Who the devil is that?” or maybe more specifically, “Who or what **is** that devil?”

Biblical scholars have wrestled with this story for years not knowing fully what to make of it. Clearly it was important to the early Christian community for it is recorded in each of the Synoptic gospels with amazing consistency. Some feel it is mere parallel or repeat of earlier biblical stories – Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years before being allowed to enter the Promised Land, Elijah pondered and waited for 40 days before he heard the still small voice of God on the same mountain where Moses spent 40 days until he received the law from God. Each one experienced a time of testing, patiently waiting for something more to occur. Moreover forty, in the bible, seems to suggest a long rather than an exact period of time. And there always seems to be an outside force or agent in conflict, in tension or in relationship to the other.

So is our Lenten journey little more than dealing with those things outside and separate from us that pull us away from or draw us closer to God?

Lent comes from the old English word *Lenten*, meaning “spring” – not only a reference to the season preceding Easter, but an invitation to the a kind of “springtime for the soul.” A time to cleanse the system – to open our eyes to what remains when all comfort is gone. It's a kind of deep cleaning, a time of purification, that starts on the inside and works its way out.

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown, Home by Another Way, Cowley Publications, Cambridge, MA, 1999, pp. 65-66.

If you were here last Sunday, you may remember our pastoral intern describing his longing to live in a climate where he would really come to appreciate the season of spring in the sense of resurrection – new life emerging from the long dreary winter as we move from Lent through Holy Week and then to Easter. I grew up in such a place – and it wasn't all that – but Luke does have a point.

One of the things I most remember from living back east was as spring approached with the freshness of forsythia blooming and the crocus raising their vibrant colors through the snow, was that we could finally open all of the windows in our house once again. When freezing cold finally subsided the house was opened and fresh air would come pouring in. It was time for spring cleaning – when we could let the fresh air of spring blow through the house and let the dust blow out. Spring cleaning allowed us to begin again, polish off, shake out the rugs and start all over.

So if Taylor is correct, and if Lent **is** a “springtime for the soul” then our focus ought not be on the externals, the temptations of the devil as depicted in the story, the darkness of our sin, rather our focus ought to be on opening ourselves, our souls, our inner lives which need cleansing in order to prepare for the glorious resurrection, an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to blow into our bodies and permeate our souls – a highly conscious enlightened state to guide us in the way of love.

Several of us have been gathering weekly to study *The Heart of Christianity*, a delightful book by Marcus Borg in which tries to make Christian faith understandable and accessible to we who live in a post-modern age. He would say that such a process of introspection – the springtime for the soul – constitutes salvation. Salvation, given this understanding, is not relegated to some future date – typically thought of as the reward for right belief. No. Salvation is realized here and now as we engage in the season of Lent. The devil is not some outside entity trying to trick us into doing wrong so that we must beat ourselves up over spiritual failure. No. The devil is within each one of us – our shadow as Carl Jung would describe – and it's not evil at all. In fact, it is an essential part of us, an aspect of ourselves we need to embrace, to be in dialog with, so that it does not control us but rather informs us, in part, as to our understanding of who we are and what makes us unique.

As children of God we embody both the capacity to do good and to make choices that result in **really** messing up – hurting others, hurting ourselves, even hurting the world in which we live. Yes, we have the capacity to do evil. Lent is a time to recognize that dual nature of what it means to be human – to recognize and to acknowledge that reality. And then to celebrate the grace of God as it is manifest to us in love. God does not punish us for our flaws and mistakes, God merely wants us to recognize them so that we may open ourselves to the wind of the Spirit to blow through our lives in this “springtime of our soul.”

Lent invites you to a journey of the heart, an examination of the soul, an openness to the God who embraces you wherever you are in order to forgive, to heal, to strengthen and to guide.

May your journey this Lent be one of introspection in order to prepare for your own personal resurrection to everlasting life.

Amen.