

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church

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Sermon 1 Lent

One of the most grueling and yet formational parts of becoming a priest is preparing for and taking the General Ordination Exams. Seminarians are tested in seven canonical areas and the testing is spread out over 3 days. Although we are all reassured that if we don't pass all the exams we can still become a priest, with some remedial work the bishop would assign, there is still a huge amount of pressure and weightiness to taking these exams. Needless to say, I had prepared for months. I had organized all my notes and resources, and had done the integrative work between the canonical areas, so I understood how whatever they may ask me on the liturgy question, I could quote the scripture passages which supported the liturgical rite or could identify what pastoral needs any portion of the liturgy was addressing.

So here I was on the day of the first exam. I lit my candle in my office in my attempt to make this really scary time also a holy time. I had my tea cup in hand, and opened my computer to find the first question. And I was thrilled! The question asked what scriptural passages supported a true understanding of stewardship. Stewardship -- my favorite topic! I loved it!! I could bring all my years of experience developing a stewardship program into the answer and my response just flowed. It was wonderful to have the first one done and to be confident in my answer. The second question arrived in an afternoon email. I was equally thrilled with this question. The canonical area being examined was theology and the question was: Is there intrinsic evil? I had taken a seminary course devoted entirely to the subject of the theology of suffering and evil, so again, I had the resources I needed to write an articulate and complete response to this question.

And I am certain that in my response, I included the scriptural passage we read this morning from the Old Testament- the story of the serpent tempting Eve. For our story tells us that God is the creator of all, and if the serpent is one of God's creatures, not something outside of what God created, and if the serpent is looked upon as that which

introduces evil, or that which personifies evil, or that which tempts us toward evil, which in itself may be defined as that which pulls us from our identity God created us to be, then evil, this destructive force in our creation has been here since the beginning. God created a world where evil was present in its inception. The force which pulled Eve out of right relationship with God, which pulled her away from who she was created to be, existed from the beginning of our creation. I am sure this passage was the cornerstone of my answer to this GOE question of intrinsic evil.

So you may imagine my surprise at my own startled reaction to a statement someone made to me later than year. It was by Priscilla, the wife of the rector I was serving with in Port Washington on Long Island. We were in one of the greatest times of my life: I had settled into the parish well, I was having so much fun developing ministry with these new friends of mine, I was preparing to be ordained as a priest, and all of a sudden it felt like the rug had been pulled out from under us. The dysfunctional bishop of that diocese was messing around about ordaining me and the other transitional deacons to the priesthood, largely because of his alcoholism and his need for control. Luckily I had a good bishop back in my home diocese, Bishop Baxter, who called me home to be ordained.

But I remember Priscilla when we were discussing Bishop Walker, saying so clearly and matter of factly, "Oh the devil always works hardest to win us over when things are going really well." I was really startled by her response. Even after all the work, and study, and prayer I had done on the topic of evil, I really didn't perceive the reality of a force around us which was crafty, intentional, and strategic in our downfall. I guess my perception of evil was more on a cosmic scale, rather than something I could plainly identify in my own life.

And yet, when we reflect upon our stories read today, isn't this the truth? In the mountaintop experiences, of both Adam and Eve and Jesus, temptation showed up. And it showed up with the intention of drawing each one of them away from their identity and purpose given to them by God. The serpent invited Adam and Eve to be on equal footing with God, rather than being in obedience to God. And to Jesus, who had just heard in his recent baptism, "You are my beloved Son", the devil showed up questioning that identity, "If you really are the Son of God", attempting to draw Jesus away from his identity as God's Son and from Jesus' purpose to bring God's kingdom to earth. In both

cases, evil attempted to disrupt their relationship with God, which is the source of their, and our, identity and purpose.

When I got over my shocked surprise to Priscilla's statement about the craftiness and strategic planning of the evil force within our particular lives, I began to reflect upon where I witnessed, in my own life, or the lives of those around me, temptation taking a stronghold. Was it related to my mountain top experiences with God? Interestingly enough, the devil seemed to be very active during my seminary years with my friends. Perhaps there **was** a connection between our drawing closer to God in our commitment to serve as God had formed us and the work of the evil force. And as I think about it, the devil was very crafty, for the temptation offered each one of us was exactly in the area of our lives which needed our attention. The devil knew our weakest places and chose to strike there. Daily we were having mountain top experiences through our worship and study and daily the devil was busy. The good news for us was that God was also busy and good prevailed over evil in most of the situations.

You may have found this to be true too in your life~ that when things seem unbelievably wonderful, there can be this nagging tug in that lives that encourages us to pull away from God. For have you ever noticed, when you feel a yearning to pray more regularly, how many distractions seem to pop up in a day so you can't possibly spend 20 minutes in silent or spoken prayer? How can this be? Does the devil know that you are strengthening your relationship with God and therefore is working mightily to prevent that?

Or when you have finally discerned your vocation, lay or ordained, and you look back and see the windy path you took to get there? Could it have been the evil force distorting your journey, leading you down some unfruitful roads?

The evil force may have shown up as a sense of self-doubt, or a certainty of unworthiness, or any other of the construction materials we use to build our tents, as Mother Betsy spoke of last week.

Or you may have noticed that you've finally gotten that promotion you've waited for and worked for, and some pride and ego begins to slip in, and your work, or your attachment to the work, keeps you up at night responding to emails or working way too late, and

suddenly you find the moments you had always reserved at the end of the day to count your blessings have disappeared. The evil force can work in very subtle ways.

Or if you've sat with and been present to a dying spouse or parent or even child, and the God-part in you says you want to be there every moment, you want to sit hour after hour and be in vigil, and you want to be the one to hold his hand, or wipes her brow, or sings sweetly in his ear, and the temptations and distractions show up. Suddenly impatience flows into your heart. Or frustration or even anger that this is how you have to spend your time. The God-part of you is being distracted, is being tempted to be diminished.

Temptation happens to each one of us every day. A spiritual practice we can take on during Lent is to name the temptation or distraction and then do what Jesus did in our story this morning. Jesus remained true to his identity and purpose. Jesus did not allow the devil to tuck into his heart an agenda other than his Father's nor did he allow the devil to plant the seed for a false sense of self-importance, nor did Jesus allow the devil to place doubt within his soul of who he really was.

Now Jesus possibly was more able to resist the temptations than Adam and Eve for a number of reasons. First, Jesus had a faith to practice, which he did. Fasting was a regular spiritual discipline he engaged in. So that when he was famished and the devil urged him to turn stones into bread, he knew he could on being hungry. He had done it before. His spiritual practices prepared him to resist.

Jesus also had the benefit of being part of a people who understood the covenant they individually and collectively had with God. And this covenant of course, came after the story of Adam and Eve. Because of the history Jesus had with the Israelite people, he knew how he was supposed to act. Jesus knew he was not alone. He had the covenanted people, whose prayers sustained him, and whose practices had developed over thousands of years. Jesus' strength in resisting temptation came from the community of faith which sustained him.

And Jesus had memory. He remembered God's lovingkindness and mighty acts. Through scripture, story, and worship, Jesus knew God's salvation history. He remembered what God had done in creation and in the prophets and the judges;

he remembered God's faithful redemption through the exodus and journey to the promised land; he remembered that the desert is a place of testing, but also one of giving manna. And he remembered his own particular experience of God in his life and prayer.

All those gifts and experiences Jesus had which enabled him to resist the temptations can be ours as well. I invite you to think about who we are as a parish and what we're focusing on and imagine how this can support you in your resistance to temptation.

Our parish has been developing a focus on spiritual practices, which strengthen our souls. We have a meditation group, a healing prayer group, an active prayer chain, a group engaging in spiritual direction, and we're exploring making our prayer beads and developing a discipline around using them. These are all resources for you to latch upon and make your own, so that you too can resist temptation, not if it show up, but when it does.

We are, like Jesus was, a part of a community, who prays for each other, who sustains each other through worship, who enjoys each other's company, who sits with each other and loves each other. We do this for we know that this can be the support we need to fuel our path toward finding or rediscovering our God-self, that authentic part of us which God created.

And we too, like Jesus, have memories of times when God was present to us, when God's love showed up, when God's strength was given to us, just when we needed it most. This is the beginning of trust. Of truly knowing that if we have fallen away, God is that compassionate father, who waits on his porch, day by day, hour by hour, for his wayward son to return, the son who had taken his money and left. God is the father who sees his son on the horizon and runs to meet him, not even waiting for an apology. I begin my weekly e-newsletter with the same offertory sentence, because I think it is at the hard of Christianity-

So come, you who have much faith,
and you who have little,
you who have been here often,
and you who have not been for a long time,
you who have tried to follow,

and you who have failed.
Come, it is the Lord who invites you.

It is the Lord who invites us to return again. It is the Lord who invites us to call upon him and cast out our demons, to turn away from temptation, and to begin again in the renewed life offered to us.

During this season of Lent, part of our work is to find what is tempting us away from who God created us to be. We are called to find it, to name it, and then to do the most important step: cast it out in the name of Christ. We are called to tap into the power of Christ's redemption. To fall upon our knees and call upon God. To tell God that we are God's beloved and that we have been marked as Christ's own forever, and to know with certainty that indeed God's power will strengthen us for the work of resisting temptation. To be tempted is not a sin. The sin happens when we follow temptation. Jesus can intervene.

When we cast out our demons, whatever they may be: fear, anger, resentment, sense of unworthiness, pride, ego, or a false sense of identity, and do it in the name of Christ, we surrender them to Christ and then they are gone. The insight I received yesterday in our healing prayer group is that if we think we can do this alone, we can't, for we merely dissipate the evil force. It just latches onto someone else, or revisits us. Yet when we push it away, by calling upon the Christ, who is our redeemer moment by moment, the evil force is surrendered to the power of love. This is how we defeat evil. This is how God's kingdom breaks into our world, by our giving of our demons to Christ. Let us engage in this hard yet holy work this Lent.
Amen.