

Lent 1, Year C
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St. James, Wheat Ridge

By the Rev. Becky Jones

I'll say this for the Devil.
When Satan goes fishing,
He knows what bait to use.

Consider our gospel story this morning
And the things he offers to Jesus.

It wasn't that the temptations set before Jesus were BAD things,
or even selfish things.
That would never have worked on someone like Jesus.

Rather, the tests that were placed before Jesus
asked him to decide whether even GOOD things
could lure him away from his focus on God's will.

Look at the first temptation: turning stones into bread.
Now Jesus has been fasting for 40 days.
Turning a stone into a loaf of bread at that point,
What would've been the harm?
I fasted for ONE day this week, Ash Wednesday,
and I thought I was going to die,
or else bite someone's head off.
Just the lack of coffee alone nearly killed me.
A 40-day fast seems unimaginable to me.

What's more, think of the good Jesus could've done
If he'd gone around turning stones into bread.
First century Palestine was a land often wracked by famine
But it doesn't appear to have had any shortage of stones.
How many hungry people could Jesus have fed?

But Jesus, if you'll forgive the pun, won't bite.
Instead he cites Deuteronomy:
"One does not live by bread alone."

Bread is good, but it's not enough to define Jesus' mission.

The second test may be even more devious.
The devil claims that he is the "ruler of this world,"
and he offers to hand over the keys to the kingdom to Jesus,
all the power in the world,
if Jesus will just worship him.

Remember that most of the known world in Jesus's day
was under the heavy-handed control of Rome.
Surely a "regime change" could only have been for the world's good!
Think of it: with Jesus in charge
He could have set the world right.
He could have abolished injustices, freed the slaves,
decreed fairness for the poor and oppressed.

But again, Jesus won't budge.
Again he quotes Deuteronomy:
"Worship the Lord your God, and serve only Him."

Then there's that last challenge,
and in many ways it's the most fiendish of them all.
Because at last the devil wises up
and cites scripture back at Jesus.
"Fling yourself off this top of this temple,"
Satan taunts.
"Go on, because if you're the Son of God,
Scripture says no harm will come to you.
Angels will catch you before you hit bottom."

Go on, he says, and prove just how much
God loves you and is willing to do for you.
But once again, Jesus returns to the words of Deuteronomy:
"Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

Seems Satan just DID put the Lord God to the test.
And it didn't work out so well for him.
Jesus's successful completion of these tests
sends the devil packing until some "opportune time" in the future.

But here's the thing.
These temptations came very early in Jesus's public ministry.
In the course of the rest of his life
Jesus DID accomplish all the things
the devil tempted him with that night in the wilderness.

Though he refused to turn stones into bread,
he does feed the hungry multitudes.
And though he refused political power,
he nevertheless proclaimed the arrival of God's Kingdom
of justice and peace.
He did proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
the year of Jubilee,
when captives were set free and
good news was preached to the poor.

And though he refused to jump off the temple
to see if God would send angels to catch him,
He went to the cross
in utter confidence
that God's will for life
would trump the power of death.

Jesus accomplished all these things
without making any deals with the devil.

So what's the lesson here for us
and our own struggles with temptation?

The devil tempted Jesus with power:
power over the physical world,
power over the political world,
and power over the spiritual world.

Power IS a strong temptation for many of us.
But I think that just as often
we are tempted by the opposite.
We are often tempted to embrace powerlessness.

We look at all the problems in the world -
the poverty, the hunger, the injustice, the environmental degradation -
and we feel overwhelmed.

We're tempted to claim that the problems are so monumental
the injustices so pervasive,
that we are powerless to do anything to make things right.

And by claiming that we are powerless
We try to absolve ourselves of responsibility.
And thus we make our deal with the devil.

We want someone else to have the power -
and therefore the responsibility -
to fix what needs fixing.
We justify inaction
because we fear that any action we take is doomed to failure.
We set our sights comfortably low
Because we fear that to dream big dreams is foolish.

There's a wonderful prayer, attributed to Sir Francis Drake:
"Disturb us Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves,
When our dreams have come true
Because we have dreamed too little,
When we have arrived safely
Because we sailed too close to the shore.

Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,
to venture on wider seas
Where storms will show your mastery;
Where losing sight of land,
We shall find the stars."

What a temptation it is to claim that we are powerless,
and so to passively accept injustice and inequality
and failing health and climate change
and all the inadequate political and social
policies that govern us,
And so we choose to do nothing.
And the devil wins.

My friends, we are not powerless.
We have never been powerless,
not when we follow a Savior like the one we follow.

All of us are invited to follow Jesus' model
of faithful servant ministry.
All of us are invited to share in the work
and the abundance of God's Kingdom.
We ARE the agents of God's Kingdom on earth.

During this Lenten season of self-examination and repentance,
let us take time to remember that
We are NOT absolved of our responsibility
to make a difference in the world.

As the apostle Paul wrote,
not in the letter to Romans that we heard today,
but in his letter to the Ephesians,
"Glory to God whose power working in us
can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine."

We are not powerless,
and we don't have to strike a deal with the devil.
We just need to put our trust in God,
then boldly sail out on that wide, wide sea
to go wherever God might be calling us.
Amen.