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Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-13, Matthew 4:1-11
“The devil made me do it”

Last December during Advent, I selected a poem for every sermon I preached during the period. I thought it would be a good idea to launch my sermons from a work of art during the Sundays of Lent, which begin today. I have two paintings today. They are not very distinct because I squeezed them on to one page. Nevertheless, they are instructive. They depict aspects of the gospel story just read by Polly. Thinking about the story, look at the pictures and tell us what you see.

Paul de Limbourg of France painted the miniature of castles scattered over the hills in the 1700s. The chateau in the foreground owned by Duc de Berry was called “one of the most beautiful in the world.” The artist surrounds it with other chateaus and cities with Jesus at the pinnacle on a mountain addressed by a dark, winged figure who is Satan. The painting depicts the third temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. The text reads, “...the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’” The depiction of the devil as a shadowy figure in flight tempting Jesus is how I have imagined the devil to be in the biblical temptation story.

The next picture by Dutch artist, Leonaert Bramer, called “The Temptation of Christ” (1645-55) has an everyday, human depiction of the devil kind of like the adage that the devil “wears a pin-stripe suit and works in Wall Street.” Here, a bread merchant asks Jesus to change a stone into bread. It is almost mocking. The biblical story seems to be a canvas of greater import but we have to credit the artist for showing that temptations can come via ordinary human beings: family members, friends and neighbors; or ourselves – the devil in us.

We began our Lenten journey on Ash Wednesday, four days ago. During the worship service, we made Lenten commitments in the areas of prayer, fasting and almsgiving/acts of compassion. In our own way, we follow Jesus into the wilderness and like every act of faith, especially when we are trying to be faithful, we can expect to be tempted. We are pressured, cajoled, seduced, sweet-talked and challenged not to continue our commitment to Christ in endeavors of faithfulness.

When we resist, we become stronger and like Jesus, angels minister to us. Angels come in the nurturing feeling of accomplishment and in affirmations from God and spiritual friends around us.

Before I look at the temptations in the gospel, we have before us the well-known, almost archetypal temptation story in Genesis. Adam and Eve give in to temptation. Responding to God's question about what she had done, Eve says, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate." In other words, "The devil made me do it." This is a classic line. It does not happen that way. ☺

The devil visits Jesus in the gospel story and tempts him three times. The first states that Jesus fasted for forty days and nights and he was famished. The tempter comes to him and says, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' Jesus answers, 'It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Have you ever been famished? I have never been as hungry as Jesus was in this story but I had a strong feeling of hunger when I went without food for two days. It is a long story but I flew into London from New York City once without money and had a train and ferry ticket the next day for Copenhagen, Denmark, where I would meet a friend. I had no money so I had no food.

I watched four young people eating French baguettes and cheese and downing wine on the English Channel ferry and I longed for a bite but was too shy and embarrassed to ask for food. My stomach ached all evening, all night and all morning now on the train heading north. At my friends home I restrained myself when offered a meal and ate politely what was given me. Shortly, thereafter, I visited the South African consul to borrow some money for the remainder of my journey.

I was not tempted to steal or do anything inappropriate on this trip but could see how I could be pushed to the edge in times of extreme hunger like Jesus. One of the lessons in the story is that the tempter comes to us in our most vulnerable moments.

Satan offers Jesus a practical solution: Turn these stones into bread. Jesus provides a spiritual response: "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" That is tough to say that when you are hungry.

To live by bread alone means that the word of God is made the chief nourishment. The primary purpose of the wilderness fast was to be nourished by God first. When the fast ends, one can return to a meal on one's own terms.

In the second temptation, Satan offers a spiritual solution and Jesus provides a counter spiritual response. The tempter can and does use scripture to lead you astray. These often come in literal interpretations. "Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his

angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.' Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

All of Jesus' answers to the tempter are quotations from Deuteronomy chapters six through eight. The individual temptations in Matthew are not as bizarre as they appear at first glance; they are all based on various ways of sinning against the great commandment to love God "with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:5) as the command was understood by the early rabbis: "heart" refers to the two affective impulses or drives, good and evil; "soul" means life, even martyrdom; "might" means wealth, property, and other external possessions. (Brown, et al in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, p. 638)

"Son of God" refers to Jesus as the representative of Israel. In the second temptation, Jesus is invited to test God's providential care by unnecessarily risking his life, a mockery of real martyrdom and the future passion. Not to put God to the test means that we serve God with all our life but not lightly. "The devil made me do it" is a light way of brushing aside the real import and consequences of giving into temptation.

The third temptation is perhaps the biggest of all the temptations. "Again, the devil took him (Jesus) to a very high mountain and showed him all the realms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Satan provides a self-centered solution ("worship me") and Jesus gives him a God-centered response ("Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."). The devil is "The Wolf of Wall Street". "Splendor" represents the temptation to prefer power and wealth to the love of God understood as fidelity to the covenant to God as found in Deuteronomy.

Jesus's reply comes from Deuteronomy 6:3 which summarizes the great Old Testament message of ethical monotheism that not wealth, not power, not anything but only God is worthy of our worship.

And so, Jesus survives the temptations and the devil flees. Something bit me on my arm recently and I developed an enormous itch but I chose not to scratch it and the itch departed from me in short order. On our way to the church today, we saw that graffiti on our newly painted tunnel was painted over. The city is on top of this. Graffiti goes up and the city takes it down. It goes up again and shortly thereafter, it is removed. Graffiti goes up the third time like the third temptation and the city takes it down. It is the same with the devil. You ignore

him, you resist her, you invoke the name of God, you draw on scripture, you pray and it departs.

With the three temptations behind us we can do no better than the words of German theologian, Karl Rahner, who concludes, “Therefore Jesus goes into the desert, therefore he fasts; therefore he leaves behind everything else that a person needs even for bare existence, so that for this once not just in the depths of his heart but in the whole range of his being he can do and say what is the first and last duty of humankind – to find God, to seek God, to belong to God to the exclusion of everything else that makes up human life...”

Paul in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 13, is crossed by a magician trying to undermine his ministry and Paul filled with the Holy Spirit, looks intently at the man and says, “You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?” That is the work of the devil, the seductive voice on the street, the whisper in your ear, or the shadow of your unconscious. Its aim is to turn you away from real life in Christ. In Lent, we resist what brings us down. We resist what brings our family, friends and world down. When we die to the part in us that wants to give in, we live with the risen Christ. Amen.