

Homily: First Sunday in Lent
22 February 2026
Emmanuel/St. Anne's Episcopal Churches
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“How to Get in Trouble”

I would not dare say “I know what you all are thinking, but I can guess what some might be thinking. Not Satan again. Isn't that outdated myth? We have Jesus in conversation with Satan here. Isn't the Satan thing just a symbol for evil? Isn't it just an image for the collective evil in our world? Perhaps. We could see Jesus here strictly in an inner struggle with the dark cultural and political atmosphere in which he lived about who he was and what he was to do in the world, tempted by options others favored.

But, getting into that question sidetracks us from the message of this sublime passage. Obviously, Jesus did struggle with the powers of darkness recurrently and never gave in to them. Whether those powers were personal, spiritual beings or the dark powers of power, greed, and lust, symbolized by the Satan symbol, they were just as real. Getting sidetracked with our rational questions might just be a victory for the tempter. Besides, how is it that we pontificate about a world we can't see? Besides, some of our darker reality can't be explained simply in impersonal terms.

I find something C. S. Lewis wrote in the introduction to *The Screwtape Letters* helpful: **“There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.”** %

3. In this Lenten season, we need reminding not only that evil lives within us, but we need reminding that there are powers of darkness aligned against us and against the purposes of God for us—whether we personalize those powers in a Satan figure or not—they are just as real. And, this story reminds us that Jesus has overcome those evil powers and offers us hope of doing the same.

I. Baptism Gets Us Into Trouble

1. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all begin Jesus' public life with his baptism followed by his temptations. John narrates but baptism but not the temptations. And, notice what the text says, "led by the Spirit into the desert to be tested." In other words, God's voice thrust him into the very place where his identity and sense of purpose would be tested. It was because of who Jesus was that he was tempted. So with us.

2. Conversion ain't all it's cracked up to be. Our baptism takes us into the same place, a wilderness place. And, it cannot be avoided. So, yes, God does lead us into a place of testing. (See BCP 302 for the baptismal promises, based in part on this text.) Where is this wilderness place? Listen to the words of Virginia poet Gregory Orr:

3.
THE ENTRANCE TO THE UNDERWORLD
A common enough mistake:
looking in the wrong place.
It's not a fissure
in the earth, or crack
in a cliff face
that leads sharply down.

You were looking in the wrong
world. It was inside
you – entrance
to that cavern
deeper than hell,
more dark and lonely.
Didn't you feel it open
at her first touch? @

The underworld is not someplace out there, it's a place down here. Once we open our lives to God's Spirit, all the stuff within us that resists God, that fears exposure, that wants freedom from commitment – all that stuff awakens and begins pushing us in a direction other than what our baptismal commitment is all about.

Lent reminds us that struggle with evil and darkness begins

within and that we can only avoid this struggle by giving in to our worst self and our darker side. Any desire to be anything like Christ, any desire to be anything like our best Christian examples – that gets us into trouble.

We can best respond by embracing who we are and believing that God loves us as we are. Only by identifying our darker self and its tendencies can we begin to bring that into the light of God's love and begin finding freedom from them. The Jesus who has overcome evil lives within us and shares our desert place with us.

Spiritual Disciplines Get Us Into Trouble

Note that Matthew says it was only after the 40 days of fasting, when Jesus was hungry that the three temptations came. Jesus fasted and prayed in the wilderness. We would assume that Jesus' minimal food intake (one can't survive 40 days with no food and water) and his hunger had drawn him closer to God. However, the same window that admits the light and the breeze also admits the rain and the burglar. Being spiritually open makes us even more accessible to the darker forces within and around us.

Have you ever found yourself in a period when you felt closer to God? Have you had a time when you succeeded in praying more, fasting, reading the Bible more, serving God in others more? What happened? Did you find that life got more complicated? Did more things go wrong? Did your schedule suddenly become insane?

Exactly. Even intending to go in a more committed and spiritual direction can get you into trouble. If you overcome that initial resistance, you will find that the struggle intensifies. Jesus did.

We would call that resistance diabolical. David Bolt did.

"Anyone who has ever tried to formulate a private prayer in silence, and in his own heart, will know what I mean by diabolical interference. The forces of evil are in opposition to the will of God. And the nearer a (person's) man's will approaches God's the more apparent and stronger and more formidable this opposition is seen to be. It is only when we are going in more or less the same direction as the devil that we are unconscious of any opposition at all." #

What can we do? Not to venture means we cater to our worst, lowest self, we take counsel with our fears and our desire for ease. Not to venture spiritually means that we live with the awareness that we did not dare, that we did not listen to our holiest desires.

To venture, to try new behavior, to pray for holy daring and for spiritual energy to risk new behaviors – that’s listening to our best self and to the Spirit. And, if the darkness in us and around us pushes back, so be it. Jesus is our brother in the desert. He’s had his own vulnerability exposed and tested, and he will be with us. Also, others in this community will be with you, too. Let us go out to Jesus in the desert place and share his temptations. He will be with us.

Note v. 11 -the devil does leave for periods of time. The pressure of conflict is intermittent. James – resist and he will flee And, note - resistance brings refreshment from the angel.

My Invitation to You

If you are lurking at the edge of commitment—there ARE things to be afraid of. Ask for holy daring. If you are living in a period of defeat and disappointment, ask for understanding. Jesus certainly has that. The Danish poet Gerrit Achterberg calls Jesus a dealer in old junk.

Inner and outer conflict refines us and helps define who we are—“If you are the Son of God” the voice said. Jesus figured it out more fully because of that voice. He has been in the wilderness place and understand us. He will sustain us there.

Leonard Cohen’s song, “The Anthem,” reminds us that darkness does not get the last word.

**Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.**

Notes

% C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters: with Screwtape Proposes a Toast* (New York: HarperCollins,), p. ix.

@ Gregory Orr, *The Caged Owl: New and Selected Poems* (Copper Canyon Press), p. 209.

#David Bolt, *Of Heaven and Hope*. Foreword, J. B. Phillips (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1965), p. 115.

\$ [Leonard Cohen, "The Anthem" <https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/1638490/Leonard+Cohen/Anthem>