

“WERE YOU THERE? I – THE DEVIL”

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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

Mark 4:1-11

One day, an elementary school teacher was grading test papers and she became suspicious that one of her students – a little boy – had cheated. His desk happened to be situated right next to the desk of the smartest girl in the class – and the teacher suspected that, indeed, he had cheated off of her paper. So, after class the next day, she called the two of them up to her desk and dismissed the rest of them.

When they were alone, she turned to the little boy and said, “I think you cheated on your test.” The boy asked why. The teacher said, “Well, you both got the highest score.” “Oh, that’s probably just a coincidence,” he replied. “Well maybe,” said the teacher, “but you both got one wrong.” “Oh, probably a coincidence again,” he said, not skipping a beat. “Well, maybe,” the teacher said again, “but it’s the same one.” “Coincidence,” the boy insisted. “Well, maybe,” the teacher said, “but on her paper she wrote, ‘I don’t know’ and on yours, you wrote, ‘I don’t either.’”

Well, friends, that’s the kind of temptation stories we like to hear about – stories that make us chuckle, and say “aren’t kids cute?” We can handle those temptation stories – but when it comes to stories like we find in this morning’s scripture lessons – well, not so much – because they hit too close to home.

Today, on this first Sunday of Lent, I want to introduce you to the sermon series I’ll be presenting for the next five weeks – it’s called “Were You There?” Each week we’ll be looking at the story of the journey to the cross by way of characters who were there. If you’ve been around here a while, you might remember years ago when we had Biblical characters visit us in worship and tell us their stories. Well, that’s what we’ll be doing this year again. Each week, as the sermon begins, we’ll be visited by the main character in the gospel lesson.

Trouble is, that today’s character is the devil. Now, I don’t know about you, but I wasn’t about to pick someone from the congregation to portray the devil. And besides, what would the devil look like? Would the devil be male or female? How would the devil be dressed? Well, you see the problem.

Besides, I thought that having the devil portrayed by a person would focus too much on the person and not on the thoughts – so today’s monologue will be one that you will hear, but not see.

So hear now, what the devil might have been pondering before he paid a visit on Jesus in the wilderness.

[AUDIO CLIP](#)

Oh indeed – the world has not seen the last of the tempter, because he is alive and well and at work in the world today. We know that all too well. Even today, he does to us and everybody else what he did to Jesus – he appeals to our fears.

He jumped on Jesus’ hunger and thirst. “Jesus, I can take away your hunger and fill you with good food. Your father might let you die here in the desert, but I won’t.”

Then he went after Jesus’ sense of self-worth and fear of being alone. “Hey Jesus, if you are who you say you are, the Son of God, prove it! Throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple, and just see if God and his angels will save you.”

Finally, he tried to get Jesus to turn his back on God, his Father. “Jesus, take a look at everything – it can all be yours if you worship me, and not your Father.”

At every turn, the tempter tried to take advantage of a supposedly-weakened Jesus – tried to get him while he was down.

That’s what the tempter does – that’s his specialty. He tries to tempt us when we’re weak or down or overwhelmed. Tries to convince us that we don’t have enough, or do enough, or are enough. Tries to tell us that what he’s trying to get us to do isn’t so bad – tries to tempt us with an alternate reality.

Friends, this is not just theological theory – you know as well as I do, this is real – because temptation is in our faces every single day, in little and big ways. The temptation to lie. The temptation to cheat. The temptation to take credit when it’s not due. The temptation to gossip. The temptation to forsake important things like home and family in pursuit of the almighty dollar or more important career positions. The temptation to not live in Christ-like ways. And perhaps, worst of all, the temptation to turn our backs on our faith in God, because times are tough and we’re going through a rough patch.

All of us face temptation all of the time – we are all very familiar with the voice of the tempter. So we would do well to be even more familiar with the ways Jesus took on the devil in the wilderness – and take them on ourselves.

Look at what he did. He stood strong, and every single time, he came back at the devil's invitation with a word of scripture – every single time. It was right there on his lips and it gave him the strength to say “No.” Every single time.

I hope you have some scripture memorized (and not just the 23rd Psalm). I know that it went out of vogue for a while in Sunday School, but it is so very important. You may not think it's so important to do, but when times get tough, and the tempter is staring you down, the Word of God on your lips can be one of your most powerful ways to combat him.

What better season of the year to immerse yourself in scripture is there than Lent? For this is the time that we commit ourselves to deeper spiritual practices – reading scripture, taking time for devotions, worshiping, praying. And if we are committed to those things, then, as one writer put it, we will be able “to live in trust even when it seems impossible to do so.”

She continues: “This is why we were given Lent. This is why we have these forty days and forty nights. This time is surely meant as gift to us to enter those practices which surely we will all one day need on that day we enter a wilderness not of our choosing. Practices which will aid us in turning back evil itself with all of its empty promises which the devil so glibly makes today. As Jesus did.” (On-line, “Dancing with the Word,” “And Suddenly Angels Came,” Janet Hunt, 2/28/17)

My friends, my prayer today is that all of us will embrace this journey through Lent as a time of empowering ourselves to live as faithful disciples of Christ. That we will commit to those spiritual practices – scripture reading, devotion, worship, prayer, service – so that we will grow closer to Christ, absolutely, but also that we will be strengthened for life's journey, and especially for those times in the wilderness, when the devil comes a'callin.

We are not without weapons to fight him, but it is our choice whether or not we'll be armed for the fight. Choose well, friends. Choose as Jesus did, so that you can fight the good fight with faith. May it be so.

Amen.