“The Devil is in the Details”

A sermon delivered by Rev. W. Benjamin Boswell
at Myers Park Baptist Church
on February 14, 2016

Over the past week many have said to me, “Ben, last Sunday was such a high, how are you ever going to top that?” Well, I don’t think it can get much higher than that so instead we are going to see how low we can go. Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent, which means that in the course of one week we have literally moved from the mountaintop down into the valley of the wilderness. The sudden arrival of this new season Lent forces us to step down from our mountain top dreams and follow Jesus into a deserted place of hunger, temptation, and death—a place where we are confronted by a strange character called the devil. If this were not the lectionary text for the first Sunday of Lent, I would probably not be preaching on it today. What minister would want to preach about the devil on the second Sunday in the pulpit at a new church?

I don’t want to end up like the preacher who gave a sermon on the devil that caused two young boys in the church to start whispering to each other after the service. The first boy said, “Wow, what a scary sermon. That devil sounds awful. Do you think he’s for real?” The second boy said, “I don’t know…but remember how the Easter Bunny turned out? It’s probably just your dad.”

There is really no theologically healthy way to even begin approaching this story without first freeing ourselves of the picture of the devil that so many of us have in our heads. The figure in this story is not the cartoon character we often see wearing a red suit, with a short beard, horns, and a tail, holding a pitchfork. If we can’t put that image away then this story will never make sense. The devil is not a monstrous independent evil power that Jesus must battle for forty days in the wilderness. Instead, he is more like the adversary (ha satan) in the OT who God allowed to test the blameless in the story of Job. We must remember that immediately following his baptism in the Jordan River, it was the Spirit that forced Jesus into the wilderness to be tested. The wilderness is a place of scarcity, but it is not a place that Jesus goes alone. The Spirit of God is there with him in the midst of the wilderness, and from the way that Luke narrates the story, one could argue that God actually intended for Jesus to be tested for forty days just like Moses and Elijah were before him.

If we can deconstruct the mythical cartoon character in our minds and resist creating a stark duality between this character and God, then we will see that the devil functions in this story more like an arrogant professor proctoring an examination or a formidable debater engaged with Jesus in a serious spiritual and theological argument. The famous Dutch painter Rembrandt captured this powerfully. Rembrandt drew several depictions of the devil tempting Jesus and in one of them the two characters almost look like friends engaged in a deep conversation as they walk side by side down a deserted road. In Rembrandt’s drawing, the devil is a half-step behind Jesus with an urgent look on his face. He is reasoning with Jesus, not menacing him. One of his wings is stretched out over Jesus shoulder the way a friend would put their arm around another. The devil is leaning in with his eyes on Jesus speaking calmly with a heavy stone in his hands. He holds the stone out to Jesus as if it were a gift. The devil doesn’t look monstrous in this scene of powerful intimacy; he looks reasonable.

Rembrandt’s drawing is not just a more accurate depiction of the devil in this story—it is also a more accurate depiction of the way we experience temptation in the story of our lives. Rarely if ever does temptation come to us dressed up like a monster in a red suit offering the forbidden pleasures of the world. The temptations we face most regularly in life are usually quite reasonable and subtle. They do not appear
as overtly evil things, instead they come disguised as something good—so good in fact that we often don’t even recognize that we are facing temptation.

We can find this subtlety within the name “the devil” itself. The word for “devil” in Greek means something slightly different than the name Satan. Ha satan means “the adversary” and the devil or diabolo means “the slanderer.” To slander is to make a false and damaging statement about someone or something. Typically, slander refers to the telling of a lie that seems to be true. That is exactly what slanderer does in this story—he stretches the truth and offers Jesus lies that seem like the truth because they are rooted in scripture and the promises of God.

The slanderer does not suggest anything inherently harmful or evil to Jesus, but he tries to entice him with good and lofty things achieved for the wrong reasons. The devil simply says, “Command this stone to become a loaf of bread...worship me and I will give you all the kingdoms of the world...throw yourself from the temple, for it is written ‘God will command the angels to protect you.’” Each test was highly symbolic. Many scholars categorize them as the economic option, the political option, and the religious option. Turning stones into bread would feed the hungry. Taking political power would liberate the oppressed. Leaping from the temple would give evidence to those who still needed proof to believe in God. Sounds good, right? And yet each temptation offered a kind of compromise, a short cut, an alternative path, an easy road, a opportunity to succeed in achieving the mission of establishing the kingdom of God on earth without doing the work of ministry, without taking the hard journey, without walking the road to Jerusalem, and without suffering a painful and humiliating death—each option was a way to avoid the cross.

The devil was tempting Jesus to believe that the end always justifies the means, and the alarming part of this slanderous idea is that the devil used scripture to support his argument. The second temptation of political power comes directly from Psalm 2:7-8 which said, “You are my son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.” The devil also quoted from the Psalms in third temptation as well; Psalm 91:11-12. Now I don’t know about you, but it bothers me that the devil knows scripture and uses it to try and mislead and deceive. Yet if you look closely at the texts he cites you’ll notice an interesting similarity. The devil is a literalist. He quotes the metaphorical poetry of the Psalms and then suggests that Jesus follow it literally. The devil may not be a monster, but there is something incredibly monstrous about the way he uses scripture.

Throughout history, scripture has been shamefully and tragically misused in diabolical ways to justify horrible things—violence against Jews and Muslims, the oppression of women, the extermination of indigenous populations, the practice of slavery, hatred and discrimination toward people of different sexual orientations, apartheid, segregation, war, genocide, the destruction of the environment, and the murder of those who disagree with the teaching of the church. In a recent book Forgive Us: Confessions of a Compromised Faith, two pastors and two theologians argue “Christianity in America has a significant brokenness in its history that demands recognition and repentance. Only by this path can the church move forward with its message of forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace.” “Confession” they claim, “is the proper biblical response when God’s people have injured others and turned their backs on God’s ways.” Confession is a good place to begin, but we must also learn from the mistakes in our collective history so that we can prevent ourselves, and others, from misusing scripture to hurt people again.

The temptations the devil presented to Jesus are real for us today. Many people have chosen to follow what I would call a compromised Christ—a Christ who has succumb to either the economic, the political, or the religious temptation. There are many who follow a Christ who has compromised to the economic option—who genuinely believe that God wants us to be wealthy and have all the “bread” we can imagine. The “prosperity gospel” misuses scripture to support belief that if you just pray harder, donate money, and have more faith you will become wealthy. It is a theology that preys on the poor instilling the myth that we are all potential millionaires and never addresses the underlying causes of injustice that maintain systems of
poverty. There are others who follow a Christ who has compromised with the political option—who believe in a national Savior—an American Jesus with American values and America ideals. Finally, there are those who follow a Christ who has compromised to the religious option—that believe in putting on a show of glitz and glamor, lights and lasers, fog machines and magic shows to compel and manipulate people to believe in God.

These are just some of the voices that call out to us like the slanderer in the wilderness offering us the temptation to compromise in life. As Frederick Buechner once said, "life is full of all sorts of voices calling [us] in all sorts of directions. Some of them are voices from inside and some of them are voices from outside. The more alive and alert we are, the more clamorous our lives are. Which voice do we listen to? What voice do we listen for? The danger is listening to the great blaring, boring, banal voice of our mass culture, which threatens to deafen us all by blasting forth that the only thing that really matters about your work is how much it will get you in the way of salary and status, and that if it is gladness you are after, you can save it for weekends. The world is full of people who seem to have listened to the wrong voice and are now engaged in a life in which they find no pleasure or purpose and who run the risk of suddenly realizing someday that they have spent the only years that they are ever going to get in this world doing something that could not matter less to them or to anyone else."

It is easy to forget that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested immediately after he’d been baptized. You may remember that when Jesus rose out of the water the Spirit descended on him like a dove and a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased." But the very next voice that Jesus heard was the voice of the devil saying, "if you are the Son of God..." The devil began every temptation with those same accusatory words, "If you are the Son of God." He was speaking slanderous words into Jesus’ ear, challenging his identity, raising questions, attempting to create insecurity, sowing the seeds of confusion, trying to provoke a crisis of self, offering compromises and suggesting that Jesus just might not be good enough unless he can turn stones into bread, or take political power, or compel people to believe in him.

Like Jesus this slanderous voice is often speaking into our lives as well trying to tell us lies about ourselves. Sometimes that voice comes from the outside—from family or friend, neighbor or enemy, music or mass media. But more often than not that voice comes from the inside—most often it is our own voice telling us that we’re not good enough—we’re too ugly, too sinful, too stupid, too short, too slow, too young, too old, too damaged, too broken, too poor, or too different. These voices can cause us to doubt whether or not we are created in the image of God, or called by Christ, or forgiven, or covered in grace, or worthy of love and admiration, or to doubt whether or not we are beloved children of God in whom God is well pleased. But I am here to tell you today that voice is a lie. It is a lie! Don’t listen to it! Regardless of what that voice is saying you are created in God’s image, you are forgiven, you are covered in grace, you are worthy of love, you are good enough, because you are a beloved child of God, and God is well pleased with you.

There is nothing you can do to earn this and nothing you can do that would cause you to lose it either. It is a gift we are given from God. We simply have to trust it. That is real lesson that we can learn from the story of Jesus temptation in the wilderness—the lesson of trust and reliance on God. It is the same lesson that the people of Israel learned in the wilderness. Every time the devil questioned his identity Jesus responded with a quote from the story of his people in Deuteronomy and each text was a powerful indication of his radical dependence on God. The slanderer said, "If you are the Son of God command these stone to turn to bread" and Jesus replied, "one does not live on bread alone." The slanderer said, "Bow down to me and I will give you all the kingdoms of the world" and Jesus replied, "worship the Lord your God and serve God only." The slanderer said, "Throw yourself off the temple and the angels will catch you" and Jesus replied, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." In every instance, Jesus respond by trusting in God and that is how he was able to resist the slanderous lies of the devil.

When I was young, my father took a Bible study course where he studied the story of Jesus’ baptism. From that day on, whenever I got a card from my dad, it ended with the same words, “You are my Son, my beloved,
and in you I am well pleased.” He made a point to say speak these words over my life whenever he could—on my birthday, when I graduated from high school, when I went into the Army, when I graduated from college, when I graduated from seminary, when I was called to my first church—he spoke these words, “You are my Son, my beloved, and in you I am well pleased.” It is amazing how powerful those words have been to me at different points in my life. They sustained me at times when other voices were saying other things. Maybe you need to hear those words spoken over you today or maybe you need find a way to speak these words over someone else.

We are standing at the first stage of our journey through the season of Lent. During this season we will be faced with temptation and testing—compromises, short cuts, alternative paths and easy roads, slanderous interpretations of scripture, the choice to follow compromised versions of Christ, and opportunities to doubt our identity as beloved children of God. We will hear many voices this season trying to tell us who we are, and what we should be. Many will suggest that we are not good enough. Therefore, we must pay attention during our journey in the wilderness and continue to ask ourselves, “Whose voice am I listening to?” Lent is the time to tune out all the other voices and listen to the voice of God, to remember who we are in God’s eyes, and to discover ourselves again under the infinite canopy of God’s grace. Lent is the time stop listening to the voice of the slanderer—the voice of economic, political, and religious compromise that is telling us that we are not good enough and that we need to make more bread, and take more power, and seek more glory. Instead, it is the time for us to open our ears once more and listen the voice that is saying the same thing to us that it has always said, “You are my child, my beloved, and in you I am well pleased.” Amen.