



Tempting ...

Romans 10:8b-13 & Luke 4:1-13

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Some of us are old enough to remember the stand-up comic Flip Wilson and his iconic one-liner, 'The Devil made me do it!' It was often offered as an explanation of bad behavior, but it always made folks laugh. At the heart of folks' reactions to this was an almost unconscious need to personify or name the power of evil in our world and an explanation of why generally well-meaning and good folks often still find themselves involved in doing things that caused themselves or others harm. Is not just a matter of bad things happening to good people, as the famous title of Rabbi Kushner's book implied, but rather why is that good people often do bad things?

The story of Christ's temptation, found in all three of the synoptic gospels, is often one of the passages read on the First Sunday in Lent. It always gets folks wondering whether the person of Satan, the devil, is an imaginary character or a real entity. Some find great comfort in thinking that there is a devil loose in the world stalking about and raising all kinds of hell with folks of all stripes and kinds. Others find such imagery appalling and a bit barbaric, thinking themselves refined to the point of finding evil and any personification of it the projection of our own latent issues with our parents or authority figures or because somebody, when we were quite young, stole our pacifier and wouldn't give it back. Still, others like to see the devil as the shadow side of God; that there is great cosmic battle going on between two equally-paired deities, one good and one evil, in which they fight for the soul of humanity both collectively and individually.

For me, the personification of evil in the character or person of Satan or the devil can become a bit of a distraction or an opportunity to put evil at arm's length rather than own up to our own participation in the darker arts as they say. In fact, I take my cue from Karl Barth, whose reading of the scripture and consideration of the texts lead him to assert that evil is actually the nothingness that human beings have created in their outright attempt to live without God and assume the role of the Almighty for themselves.

William Willimon, Methodist theologian of some renown, wrote a book about evil in the mid-1980's, expressing his discomfort with the imagery of Satan or the devil. Soon after publication he received a letter from a woman who had been a pastor for a few years. She wrote:

What you say about there being no real Satan may be true. However, as a woman pastor, I have come to believe that, if evil doesn't have a name, Satan, or the devil, it ought to. I came into the ministry because God called me here. ... The churches I have served are full of good people, at least better-than-average people who are in the church wanting to be good and to do good. For the most part, my ministry among them has been well received. But not completely. I have seen good people do some terrible things. I have witnessed a depth of cruelty, some, but not all of it directed toward me, that has shocked me. I am now willing to believe that our lives are not entirely our own, that we are in the grip of something, someone who leads us down dark paths. In short, I am more willing than you to conceive of Satan.

Though I am not as comfortable as the letter-writer is with the personification of evil in the person of Satan, she certainly has something about the claim that there is 'something, someone who leads us down

dark paths.’ I could, I suppose, shrug my shoulders and say that Pogo was right: ‘We have met the enemy and it us,’ but that doesn’t answer the question completely or fully either.

Regardless of how we might describe evil, this passage from Luke that launches our Lenten season is about resisting such evil in this world and in our lives. It is most obvious, that both the gospel writer and Jesus himself knows of the reality of evil and finds it the very thing that must be resisted by all that is good. Such resistance takes many different measures or approaches in human lives and interactions, and it is not that Jesus is actually prescribing any particular course of action, except to trust in the ultimate goodness and power of God and resist with our whole heart and mind that which leads us down those darker paths of life.

Jesus is not prescribing that we develop a nice Polly-Anna-ish gloss that doesn’t recognize that evil happens all around us and in us, rather he advocates a direct confrontation with that which is evil, dark and anything that leads us away from the ways of God and goodness in this world. Whatever THAT is, it must be resisted.

Though such evil can affect us, approach us, entice us, in many and various ways, Peter Gomes, the great Harvard preacher, found a commonality here within the text for today and our lives and our resistance to evil:

So, the lesson is about temptation, and it is about confrontation as well. Ultimately, it is a parable about perseverance ... It would be satisfying to us if this account of Jesus’ temptation ended with the triumphant defeat of Satan after the third trial, but it doesn’t ... Rather than a defeat, it was a strategic retreat, a retreat until an opportune time when Jesus would once again be both vulnerable and susceptible to Satan’s blandishments. Lurking in the shadows of the agony in Gethsemane, hovering about the passion of Calvary, Satan had not by any means quit the contest. Jesus’ temptation was not over.

In a like way, our resistance to evil in this world, both as individuals and collectively, does not come to an end. It’s not over with one confrontation and we somehow gain victory over the temptations to forge our own ways rather than seeking the Spirit of the living God in all his ways. This is a continual struggle that ebbs and flows with all of us.

Gomes makes a further point that tags along with these thoughts:

The devil awaits that opportune time with us, that time when he can appeal to our injured pride, our wounded ego, our fear of not being appreciated, our anger at being ignored. These are those opportune times when the devil’s persistence reaps great benefits.

It’s not a matter of always being on guard against such moments; it’s more about always being willing to trust that ultimately God has us and all creation well in hand – a trust that leads to persistent and continual reliance upon him rather than solely upon our own coping mechanisms. Temptation gives the opportunity, in the Lenten season and beyond, to place our trust in the One who accompanies us, who goes with us, and saves us ... saves us even from our temptations and even from ourselves.