

Sermon for Christ and Grace Church, Petersburg, VA
First Sunday of Lent, Year A, March 5, 2017
The Rev. Bill Queen
“Our Temptations In This Wilderness”
Matthew 4:1-11

remember the comedian Flip Wilson?; for a while he had his own TV show; one of the characters he portrayed was Reverend Leroy of the Church of What’s Happenin’ Now; he also portrayed Geraldine, whose boyfriend was named Killer; remember Geraldine’s response anytime she did something she shouldn’t have done?; “the devil made me do it!”; have you ever used that as an excuse?

there’s always the danger, when we talk about Satan or the devil, to take a humorous approach like Flip Wilson’s, or to call up ridiculous images like red suits, horns, pointed tail, and pitchfork; that kind of thinking might lead us to believe the devil is meaningless or powerless; but it is equally dangerous to go to the opposite extreme and imagine the devil lurking behind every tree, or to presume that the devil’s power rivals that of God’s; that kind of thinking might lead us to believe the devil is more powerful than he really is; the very idea that there is a devil can be a stumbling block for some people and keep them away from Christianity; L. Frank Baum, author of the famous *Wizard of Oz*, said that one of the things that kept him from becoming a Christian was such a belief in the devil

so what is the Episcopal Church’s take on Satan and the devil?; you might recall that we address the question squarely every time there is a Baptism; in the Baptismal liturgy (*Book of Common Prayer* p. 302) the Baptism candidates, or if they cannot speak for themselves, their parents and godparents, make three renunciations

the first is to “renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God”; Christians disagree widely on this, whether evil can be personified or not; all that the Baptism candidate is asked to do is to say, in whatever way they understand spiritual evil, that they will have nothing to do with it

the second renunciation is to “renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God”; this one is a bit easier to see: crime, war, abuse, pollution, hatred, etc., etc. that we read about and watch on the news every day; again the Baptism candidate is asked to state that they will have nothing to do with

this kind of worldly evil

the third renunciation is to “renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God”; this is the one that does not allow us to place any blame outside of ourselves (sorry Geraldine); I’m sure each one of us could provide our own list of things that get between us and God, or things that we put in place of God, or perhaps even putting ourselves in God’s place; again the Baptism candidate is asked to state that they will have nothing to do with this kind of personal evil; but that is a very hard promise to keep

temptation is the real problem when it comes to personal evil; that’s what we see Jesus having to deal with in his 40 days in the wilderness; while we might presume it was easy for Jesus to resist the devil’s temptations, that lessens the fullness of his humanity; Jesus understands our fight with temptations, because he had to fight them the same way himself!

it’s not so easy when we are the ones being tempted; our stories of trying to resist temptation probably don’t often turn out to be such clear-cut victories for the side of the good that Jesus’ is; the fact is, each of us is on a journey through the wilderness of this world, and we are beset by temptations for our entire lives; where do temptations come from and how can we deal with them?

fear can lead to temptations; the fear of growing old, of sickness, or of death can lead one into a midlife crisis, where a sports car, or a younger partner, or cosmetic surgery present illusions of youth; those are false solutions to real fears; but God tells us we don’t have to fear old age, or sickness, or even death

desire can lead to temptations; the desire for recognition might lead us to claim something that rightly belongs to others; but our true recognition comes from knowing we are beloved children of God; the desire for financial security might lead us to put work ahead of family, or friends, or helping others; but true security comes from trusting in God

anxiety can lead to temptations; seeking too many empty diversions, or distraction from the realities of life, or habits of overindulgence in food, drink, or more dangerous substances that dull anxiety without dealing with it; but God tells us not to be anxious or to worry; that no matter what, God is with us

Lent is a good time to try and become aware of the temptations, the fears, the

desires, and the anxieties that may trip up not only our spiritual lives, but our personal lives, family lives, financial lives, and professional lives as well; look out for any of these things that may seem out of balance or too easily satisfied: those might be red flags of warning

and look back at Jesus' own story to see the resources he called on for help in resisting temptations; Jesus studied and knew scripture well: that provides us with a God's-eye view of life and its proper priorities that is an alternative to our human-eye view of things; Jesus sought out regular times for prayer in order to refocus his life: all of us can benefit from such regular prayerful refocusing; and Jesus called upon a close circle of friends and disciples instead of trying to go it alone: we have a church community which includes both clergy and fellow Christians who all struggle with the same things; we can and need to call upon each other to be there for each other for help, support, and guidance

temptation is not easy to resist, but we've not been left alone without the tools and the relationships that can help us; use this time of Lent to use those tools and to call upon whomever and whatever help you need