

February 28, 2021
Second Sunday in Lent—Year B
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16
Psalm 22:22-30
Romans 4:13-25
Mark 8:31-38

For a while I've been pondering doing an occasional preaching series on the Baptismal Covenant. This is the time of year when I would normally be holding an inquirer's class—a class for those seeking baptism, confirmation, reception, or reaffirmation. You all know what baptism and confirmation are, but I should remind you that reception is for people confirmed in another tradition (usually Roman Catholic or Lutheran), and reaffirmation is for people who were confirmed a while ago and want to recommit. I hold the class during Lent because, since the early days of the church, that's the period of final preparation for baptism, which took place during the Easter Vigil.

I structure the inquirer's class around the promises of the Baptismal Covenant, which is part of the liturgy for Holy Baptism in the *Book of Common Prayer*. Even when there is no baptism, we use the Baptismal Covenant on the days especially appropriate for baptism: the Easter Vigil, Pentecost, All Saints', and Baptism of the Lord. I'll explore the Baptismal Covenant in the weeks come. This week, I want to look at the part of the liturgy for Holy Baptism precedes it, the part we hear only when there is a Holy Baptism. It's been a while since we've had one—because of the pandemic, our last baptism was little Sylvia Empsall in January of last year.

Remember, the rite of Holy Baptism begins with the presentation of the candidate and then moves to a series of questions. Those questions are directed to the candidate if they are old enough, or to their parents and godparents if they are not. Here those opening questions, with the responses:

Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?
I renounce them.

Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?
I renounce them.

Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?
I renounce them.

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as our Savior?
I do.

Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?
I do.

Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?
I do.¹

Let's hear that first question again: "Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?" No matter how many times I hear it, it always surprises me that baptism begins with Satan.

You don't hear a lot of talk about Satan in the Episcopal Church. Maybe that's why it's so surprising to have him show up here. Who is this Satan? Is he the fallen angel who has established a counter-kingdom of doom to which he spends his days trying to lure us? Is he the being who tortures for infinite time the dead whom God has judged to have fallen short? Some version of all that is what many Christians would say. Personally, I'm just not so sure, and I'm not sure it's helpful for those of us under this section of the Christian tent. Maybe there are other ways of thinking about Satan.

This came up for me because, last Sunday and this Sunday, our Gospel readings from Mark threw a one-two punch of Satan.

I should pause here to observe that, while Satan gets a lot of attention in some quarters of Christianity, he's not a big presence in the Bible. In the entire Bible—that's including both the Old and the New Testaments—Satan shows up in only 47 verses. That's 47 verses among more than 31,000. In all four Gospels, Satan is named in only 14 verses, and 4 of those are these two stories from Mark and their parallels in Matthew. Admittedly, "the devil" is named in an additional 32 verses, all in the New Testament. Not surprisingly, the Book of Revelation is the book heaviest with "Satan" and "devil" references.

Last week, at the beginning of Mark, Satan himself showed up to tempt Jesus during his forty-day excursion to the wilderness. This week, Jesus invokes Satan in an instance of name-calling. The story begins with Jesus, now headed to Jerusalem, foreshadowing his own suffering, death, and resurrection. In response, Peter stepped well beyond his place in the pecking order and, as Mark says, "took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him." It is no surprise that, in return, Jesus more publicly rebukes Peter, using perhaps the strongest possible terms. I've read this encounter described as Peter is *tempting* Jesus to take an easier path. To a momentarily Satanic Peter, Jesus is essentially saying, "Lead me not into temptation."

You will recognize the corporate version of those words as part the traditional-language version of the Lord's Prayer: "Lead us not into temptation." Last year, for the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Francis approved changing those words to these: "Do not let us fall into temptation." In news stories about that change, Francis was quoted as saying this about the original:

It is not a good translation because it speaks of a God who induces temptation. I am the one who falls. It's not him pushing me into temptation to then see how I have fallen.

A father doesn't do that; a father helps you to get up immediately. It's Satan who leads us into temptation—that's his department.²

When I first heard about this, I had mixed feelings. On one hand, I'd rather not imagine God as temptation manager. On the other hand, the Bible is actually rather unclear on this. One Biblical scholar recognized this problem, saying, "This new version of the Lord's Prayer tries to avoid implying that God has some hand in evil. ... But in doing so the pope *not only* overlooks the many biblical examples where God works with the devil to tempt his followers and even his own son [emphasis added]. The new version actually goes against the plain meaning of the Greek of the gospel text."³ After all, as we heard just last week, it was the Holy Spirit—aka God—who drove Jesus to the wilderness and his encounter with Satan.

If we want to know more about where Jesus was coming from with this week's name-calling of Peter, we might turn to the Book of Job. It's logical to look there: in the entire Hebrew Scriptures, Satan shows up in only 14 verses, 11 of which are in Job. And in Job, God is in charge of Satan.

Remember, Job is, as the scripture says, "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil."⁴ Job is also wealthy in children (he has ten), livestock (he has thousands), and servants (he has "very many" of them). Satan is simply one among the "heavenly beings" or, translated more literally, "Sons of God."⁵ "Satan" is actually better termed "*the Satán*," which we might better translate as "the Accuser" or "the Prosecutor." God has great confidence in Job. But Satan says to God, in effect, "Of course Job is exceptional, he has everything he could possibly want. Take it away, and 'he will curse you to your face.'⁶"

God goes along, letting Satan test Job by setting in motion events that cause Job to lose all his children, all his livestock, and all his servants. In the end, Job passes his test: he never curses God, and God restores his fortunes. But those dead people are still dead, and so there sure is a lot of suffering along the way. I'm not sure who comes off worse, Satan or God. This is a good place to observe that Job is not history. It's theological argument presented as poetry.⁷ Satan is part of the setup for the theological message.

Job gets worldly restoration, but Jesus offers a rather different response to the suffering that his followers will undoubtedly experience. In John 14:16, Jesus says, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever." Here "Advocate" is a translation of "Paraclete," which might also be translated as "Counselor." We understand the Advocate to be the Holy Spirit. This is the same Holy Spirit who drove Jesus to the wilderness—and, it seems fair to assume, who stayed there with him.

With all of that, it's easy to imagine *wilderness* instead as *courtroom*: Prosecutor on one side, Advocate on the other, and God in the Judge's seat. Both Prosecutor and Advocate are officers of the court. Let's think about the goal, remembering that we're talking about God here. Perhaps the goal is something less like *punitive* justice and something more like *restorative* justice.

Let's hold that imagine while also remembering that all our human conceptions of God will necessarily fall short. God is not an old white guy with a long gray beard. Satan is certainly not a red man with black goatee, horns, tail, and cloven hooves for feet. As something like wind, the Holy Spirit comes off much better, but that description is still completely inadequate.

Let's hear that first baptism question again: "Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?"

Maybe that brings us back to today's reading from Mark. Jesus uses this exchange with Peter not only to reaffirm Jesus' own fate, but also to draw others into it. Those disciples are at a big decision point. This small denial from Peter will soon become a much larger one. If they choose to keep following Jesus, their lives are going to get much harder. The temptation to deny all that just won't work. They are going to have to sacrifice; they are going to have to change.

For us, everyday life is filled with decisions. When we make the big decision to embrace the Christian life, we also make a commitment to let that influence how we make many of the small decisions that follow. It occurs to me to wonder, What if Satan is a sort of force that reveals to us the implications of our decisions? What if that nudging helps the Holy Spirit to do her work?

The structures of systemic evil rely on a vast accumulation of small human decisions made along the way, decisions often made for the sake of convenience or expedience or ease or denial, decisions that alone are sometimes nearly inconsequential but together can be devastating. I think of my own relatives who have somehow come under the spell of the extreme right. But I am far from innocent. For the sake of argument, let's go back to that restorative justice courtroom. There is Satan, offering up the charges for the week: You bought a book from Amazon instead of Atticus. You didn't say anything to the person on the Zoom call who said something mildly racist to a person of color. You drove three blocks to the pharmacy instead of walking.

There is Satan and there is the Holy Spirit, guiding us toward something better. Maybe Satan can shake us up, and maybe the Holy Spirit can settle us down. Maybe forty days in the wilderness with Satan—and with the Holy Spirit—is just what we need, if we're seeking God's kingdom.

Notes

¹ 1979 Book of Common Prayer, 302-303.

² Harriet Sherwood, "Led Not Into Temptation: Pope Approves Change to Lord's Prayer," *The Guardian*, June 6, 2019, available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/06/led-not-into-temptation-pope-approves-change-to-lords-prayer#:~:text=Now%20Pope%20Francis%20has%20risked,Conference%20of%20Italy%20last%20month>. (accessed February 28, 2021).

³ Meredith Warren, quoted in *The Guardian*.

⁴ Job 1:1 NRSV.

⁵ Job 1:6 NRSV. "Heavenly beings" is given the footnoted translation "sons of God."

⁶ Job 1:11b NRSV

⁷ See, for example, Robert Alter, "Job: Introduction" in *The Hebrew Bible*, volume 3, *The Writings* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), 457-464.