

March 6, 2022
The First Sunday in Lent, Year C
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Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16
Romans 10:8b-13
Luke 4:1-13

What is your greatest temptation? Sweets? Wine? Meat? These are things that people commonly give up for Lent. Among them, my greatest temptation is sweets. I have a terrible sweet tooth. One of my most consistent pandemic coping mechanisms has been baking, and particularly baking cookies. When I make cookies, I make a batch of dough and form it into balls, but I don't bake them all at once. Instead I store them in the freezer. That way, I can pop a couple of dough balls out of the freezer and into the oven and—voila!—warm fresh-baked cookies any time I want them. For me, pandemic baking has been not only a consoling indulgence, but also an organizing strategy. Working at home during stressful times ... the promise of a special evening cookie reward keeps me from snacking throughout the day.

Among sweets, wine, and meat, my greatest temptation is sweets. Unfortunately, this is not my greatest temptation among all temptations. During Lent, one reason we give up lesser temptations is because this reminds us about greater ones. Here are a few: the temptation to hoard money; the temptation to blame others when things go wrong; the temptation to be unkind to people who are lower on various societal power scales. And how about this big one: the temptation to demonize people who already occupy the margins.

Forget sweets, wine, and meat; it's much harder to give up temptations like these. Temptations become such a habit that we don't even notice that we are indulging them. Using the term "give up" understates the challenge. What's required is something more like an excision or even an exorcism. Maybe that's where the devil comes in. The English word *devil* is a translation of the Greek word *diábolos*. *Diábolos* means simply someone who is a "false accuser" or a "slanderer."¹ It's a combination of two Greek words: *ballo*, to throw or to cast; and *diá*, apart. So a *diábolos* is a person who creates a rift.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent, what we might call Temptation Sunday. Each year on this Sunday, we recall one of the three stories of Jesus' 40-day sojourn in the wilderness, which itself recalls the Israelites' 40 years of wandering. It's not coincidental that there are 40 days from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday, not counting Sundays, which are always feast days.

Apart from any literal meaning to this story, Matthew, Mark, and Luke have reasons to tell it, and to tell it here, early, right after Jesus' baptism. They're establishing Jesus' *bona fides* as son of God. Jesus is nudged to the wilderness by the Spirit, and visited there by the devil. Their involvement signals the high stakes involved. As one author puts it, Luke has made a claim about Jesus, and "If that claim is going to justify why Jesus should speak and the listener should listen, it must be verified. In fact, it must be tested by an adversary no ordinary village carpenter ... could be expected to match." The author continues, "This is a classic story of challenge-response. Honor and status are on the line. Its focus is *testing*, not *seduction* [italics added]." And, "What is offered here ... is a test of Jesus' true heart." "Jesus is tested in regards to his loyalty to God" and "this test occurs at the cosmic level where false hearts are inexorably exposed and no secrets can be hidden." The author reiterates, "this is first and foremost a test of kinship loyalty."²

Yes, Luke is doing something particular here. Still, all this leads to a question we might ask ourselves: Is my loyalty to the powers of this world, or is my loyalty to God?

When it comes to loyalty to God, some quarters of Christianity claim the high road. Don't necessarily believe it. They often think the devil is marauding around in ordinary daily life. That may be so, and if it is, I'm pretty sure they're following him straight to hell, at least metaphorically speaking. When it comes to the powers of this world, conservative politicians have been using the language of Christianity to leverage the right wing for decades. It's a proven strategy, though it requires tweaking over time. The latest unholy trinity of devilish whispers includes the 2020 election, critical race theory, and people who are transgender. All three are awful, but the attack on trans people has its own egregious nature. The results aren't theoretical. They're personal. They're about human beings. Sometimes it's a matter of life and death.

Somewhat depressingly for some of us, the news of the last few weeks has included the "Don't say gay" bill in Florida, yet another sports ban in Iowa, and, perhaps most egregiously, that executive order in Texas. I'm going to read the response posted last week by TransEpiscopal. In their own words, "TransEpiscopal is a group of transgender, nonbinary, and allied Episcopalians dedicated to fostering the full embrace of trans and nonbinary people, and our loved ones within the Episcopal Church and to inspiring faith-based advocacy for trans and nonbinary justice in the wider world."³ Here's what they said:

This week, in the midst of an unfolding global calamity in Ukraine, news from Texas has exacerbated a climate of fear and division. ... we were appalled to learn about Governor Greg Abbott's letter to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services calling upon the department to consider trans affirming medical care for adolescents a form of child abuse. The letter cites an opinion by the Office of the Attorney General in support of his claim and calls upon the agency to investigate "any reported instances of these abusive procedures in the State of Texas." The letter not only heaps further stigma upon trans youth and their families, but also raises the specter of community surveillance. It calls upon people from doctors to teachers, to general members of the public—all of whom are specifically mentioned in the letter—to report trans youth and their families. This threat of splitting trans people and our families off from a wider sense of safety in community—or, worse, of separating trans youth from their supportive families—is precisely the opposite of what our families and communities need.

While we appreciate those emphasizing that Governor Abbott’s directive may not be enforceable, we recognize this move as yet another example of how trans people and our families are being used as wedge issues in an ongoing culture war. The letter is an intimidation tactic, designed to foment stigma and instill fear. We are weary of the waves of anti-trans legislation that have been hitting our community across the United States in recent years. We abhor the targeting of trans youth—particularly trans girls—and their families in these most recent efforts, building on the years of so-called bathroom bills that have been fueled particularly by trans misogyny.

Trans young people and their families need our support and encouragement. They need upholding in community, to be lifted up, encouraged, and celebrated as the people they are and are becoming. Trans and nonbinary people are made in God’s image and called by God to embody the sacredness of who we are within the full gender spectrum of God’s creation.⁴

This week I checked out the website of The Trevor Project. According to the website, “The Trevor Project is the world’s largest suicide prevention and crisis intervention organization for LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning) young people.”⁵ I went there looking for statistics to offer you. I knew basically what I would find, and maybe that’s why what really struck me was something else. When I opened the website, a pop-up window opened on my screen with this message:

Quick Exit

Press the ESC button three times to quickly leave our site.

In other words, do *this* if your space is not safe and someone walks in. I’d never seen that sort of thing on a website before. It thought it was great—and it made me sad to imagine the circumstances under which it is necessary. Without offering specific numbers, I’ll just say this: LGBTQ youth are more likely than others to consider or to attempt suicide, and trans youth are even more likely. And this: if a trans youth has even one person in their life who uses their correct pronouns, their risk is significantly reduced. In other words, one person can make a difference.

Despite claiming letters in the LGBTQ+ alphabet, I let myself get behind the times when it comes to my T siblings, especially when it comes to the subset of trans people who are nonbinary. I’m trying to catching up. It’s the Christian thing to do. But that’s not the only reason to get with it. Here’s one example of why: the wisdom of trans people is reframing the Christian understanding human embodiment, and that is reframing the Christian understanding of the human relationship to God. We shouldn’t be *scared* of this; we should be *ecstatic*.

Earlier I said that the promise of a special evening cookie reward keeps me from snacking throughout the day. I suppose some could hear this as support for what some Christians say: that it's okay if a person suffers in this life, because it earns them the payoff of a heavenly reward. Here's the thing: I was talking about *cookies*, not *salvation*. Jesus is very clear about this: God doesn't intend for people to suffer. God calls every human being to the fullness of life, here and now. *That* is the kingdom of God.

I suppose all this hearkens back to that big temptation I mentioned, the one to demonize people who already occupy the margins. Whether there is a literal devil doing it, you will be tested, and you will be tempted to allow that tearing apart. Measure your success by asking this: *Am I being loyal to God?* It seems to me that the only measure of *loyalty to God* is *love*.

Notes

¹ “διάβολος (Strong's G1228), *Blue Letter Bible* online, available at <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g1228/kjv/tr/0-1/> (accessed March 6, 2022).

² Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 240.

³ “Who we are,” on the “About” page of the TransEpiscopal, website, available at <http://www.transepiscopal.org/about.html> (accessed March 6, 2022).

⁴ “In a time of fear, solidarity, and love,” a TransEpiscopal blog post, February 24, 2022, available at <http://www.transepiscopal.org/blog/in-a-time-of-fear-solidarity-and-love> (accessed March 6, 2022).

⁵ From the home page of The Trevor Project website, available at <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/> (accessed March 6, 2022).