

Sandra Stogsdill Brown
Go Away, Satan!
A sermon on Matthew 4:1-11, 1st Sunday in Lent
March 1, 2020

This year Pat and I have been making an effort to preach on some of the lectionary passages that we haven't preached on before. Today, in honor of the first Sunday of Lent, we're taking a break from that and looking at a text that we've preached a LOT, this account of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness.

[Now, I don't know about Pat, but sometimes when I come to a text I have preached on multiple times in the past, it's a bit of a challenge to find something new to say. For example, the story of Jesus' birth in the Gospel of Luke. Oh, my goodness. I love that story, but trying to find a fresh spin on it is a little bit like trying to squeeze toothpaste out of an almost empty tube that everybody else has been squeezing on already, ahead of you. You flatten the tube, and pinch the top, please God, just one more little blob for Christmas Eve. And fortunately, God always comes through, but some years it can be a stressful process. Thankfully on Christmas Eve, most people come for the music, and they definitely don't want to a fresh spin on that.

But THIS story . . . wow. For me, the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness is like slicing into a big, ripe ruby red grapefruit or golden pineapple that just keeps on oozing juice. There's always more. Over the years I've homed in on Jesus' hunger and vulnerability, the hazards of the wilderness, the role of scripture, the verbal duel between Jesus and the devil, the nature of the specific temptations.] Such a short little passage, but so much to chew on. This year the phrase that jumped out at me in a new way when Jesus finally says to the devil, "Go away, Satan!"

It reminds me of one of my favorite movie scenes. I have used this in a sermon before, but it's that moment in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, when the wizard Gandalf is facing off with the balrog, a demon from the ancient world. And I'll back up a little bit, because it's worth it to do that with this particular story today. The fellowship of the ring is these 9 people—men, hobbits, an elf, a dwarf, and Gandalf. They are on a quest to destroy a ring. To get where they are going, they have to choose between going over the mountains, or going under them, through the mines.

Gandalf really doesn't want to go through those mines—apparently he's been in there before, and it wasn't good. But a blizzard makes going over the mountains impossible. So Gandalf has to go down there with the rest of the fellowship.

When they finally encounter the balrog, a fire-breathing, giant, shadowy demon thing with flames shooting out of his back and brandishing a whip of fire, the nine members of the fellowship run for their lives, and for a while it looks like they might make it without any losses. But it quickly becomes clear that this is a show-down that Gandalf cannot avoid. He has to do battle with it. He stops, turns around, looks that demon in the face, and bangs his staff and sword and says those famous words, "You shall not pass!" I remember the first time I saw this movie, and even now, there was just something incredibly satisfying about watching Gandalf stop and turn around and stand up to this dark, shadowy thing.

I think one reason it feels so good to watch scenes like that in movies is that it puts the demons out there, where we can easily see them for what they are. In real life, it's not always that simple.

This week, when I looked at Jesus saying to the devil, “Go away, Satan!” I found myself wondering, hmmm. Why didn’t he just start with that? As soon as the devil showed up, why not just tell him to go away immediately? Why engage in conversation?

A real possibility is, Jesus didn’t recognize him at first. For us humans, devils and demons don’t always show up as easily identifiable fire-breathing monsters. They are sneakier than that. They show up as our own craving for things that seem reasonable and harmless. Things we feel we might even deserve. I mean, would it really be so bad if Jesus turned stones into bread? Just quietly, just a few, just for himself? No one needs to know about it. After all, he turns water into wine. And he turns five loaves and two fishes into a feast for thousands of people.

But Jesus’ power is not about personal convenience—and if he started now, where would it end? Eventually it could end with Jesus coming down off the cross when it got to be too much for him.

And what about that whole testing-God-by-jumping-off-the-temple thing? If God saved you from that, you’d never doubt God again, would you? You would have absolute proof that God was for real. Wouldn’t it be great to set the terms for your own faith? Like a kid saying to a parent, if you truly love me, you’ll buy this toy for me. Is that really so bad? But Jesus has recently been baptized, and heard the voice from heaven saying, “This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.” That’s the voice he needs to trust.

And finally, the devil’s offer to give Jesus the world if Jesus will bow down and worship him—that needs no explaining. After all, when we worship God, we have to let God call the shots and that can be scary. Jesus did put God first, and it took him to the cross. But it was that

third, outrageous offer that woke Jesus up, and helped him name that shadowy presence in his hunger-induced hallucinations. Satan, you rascal, get out of here. I'm done talking to you.

Like Gandalf, Jesus could not avoid a showdown with the dark side. And like Gandalf, Jesus had to stand, look his demon in the face, and call him out. That's the human story. We all have to do that.

In January, I got a statement from my daughter Rachel's college for her spring semester tuition and fees, and I noticed the amount was lower than it had been for the fall semester. I was thrilled. Upon closer inspection, and checking it against last semester's statement, I figured out that Rachel was being charged for sharing a double room. Rachel is actually in a single room, which costs more. I thought, I hoped, well, maybe they are giving her a discount because that dorm she's in is so old and shabby compared to some of the newer ones. I said to myself, they must know what they're doing because they certainly charged her for a single room last semester. Would it really be so bad if we were undercharged this semester? We pay so much money already! With another daughter heading to college next fall, we need every break we can get . . . boy, the devil is smooth, isn't she?

And then, hearing my own thoughts, I was able to have my own, "Go away, Satan" moment, and called the business office, where they were very happy to receive my phone call, which alerted them to a glitch in their billing system, and—they were also very happy to immediately bill me for the full cost of Rachel's single room.

The point is—

The world is not black and white, and there is more than one way to look at just about every situation, and people are complicated, and life is complicated, but there are also moments when it is time to call out the devil and send him packing.

And sometimes the devil speaks to us through a human we know and love. You've heard me speak frequently about the importance of not demonizing people, of seeing Christ in people, and honoring our connection with one another, and I stand by every word, but sometimes well-intentioned people will say things that the devil uses to make us doubt ourselves and our mission. That's why, later on in Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus tells his disciples he must go to Jerusalem and suffer and be killed, and Peter says, "No way!", Jesus says to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!" Because Peter's words are a real temptation to Jesus. They speak to Jesus' yearning NOT to suffer—to take a different path that won't be so painful and hard.

And don't we often hear those voices in our own lives. Don't be the person of God that you are. Don't trust God. Don't rest in God's grace and protection. Don't love yourself as God loves you. Don't take the steep path, even though the steep ones have better views. Whether that voice speaks to you through advertising, social media, a well-meaning friend, or your own self-doubt, we can respond the same way Jesus did: "Go Away, Satan." I love the words of James 4:7--"Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."

As we begin our Lenten journey together, I invite you to spend some time with this question in the coming weeks: What dark presence do you need to turn around and confront these days? What sinister, seductive voices do you need to call out and name? What do you need to banish from your life for a while, or forever? Do you need to stop worrying? Do you need to stop buying more stuff? Do you need to cut the complaining? Do you need to stop blaming yourself and set down that load of shame you've been carrying around? Is there an addiction that is taking hold of you, and if so, remember that just as God sent angels to wait on Jesus, there are angels in the form of helpers and support groups ready to minister to you, and Pat or I would be privileged to help guide you in finding those angels. Because the devil has to flee

if you resist him, but he's always looking for a way to come back, and we all need some angels to strengthen us for the next time. Sometimes we ARE the angels, sometimes we NEED the angels, and always we are called to worship the Lord our God, and serve only him. . .