

Time to Resist

First Sunday in Lent, 10 March 2019.

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13.

*The devil went down to Georgia
He was lookin' for a soul to steal
He was in a bind
'Cause he was way behind
And he was willin' to make a deal . . .*

Someone once asked Charlie Daniels why he wrote this song. He said, "You would think if there was ever a song that we had that had some kind of story to it, it would be this one." But the truth is, they were in the studio recording an album and suddenly realized they didn't have a fiddle tune in the mix. The idea for this song had been in the back of Daniels's head. It may have come from a poem he read in high school, but it was not fully formed. So he took a few days off from recording and wrote the whole thing.

In the recording, Daniels played both fiddle parts - the devil's and Johnny's. He said people sometimes tell him they think the devil played the better tune, but Daniels does not buy it. He said of the devil's song, "If you dissect it and listen to it . . . There's just nothing there. I mean, there's nothing. There's no music involved."

But though the song came about fairly unintentionally, the theology of it is actually good, which does not always happen with popular music. Charlie Daniels is saying the devil is nothing. And the song says the devil can be beat. At least for a time.

*The devil bowed his head
Because he knew that he'd been beat
And he laid that golden fiddle
On the ground at Johnny's feet*

Our gospel lesson for today proclaims this same hope. The devil can be beat. Evil can be resisted. We do not have to give in to the lures and temptations and oppressive powers of this world. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we can resist.

We should be careful in reading this lesson not to be blinded by the devil's form. In the lesson, the devil appears to Jesus in personified way, as someone with whom you can have a conversation. That has often led Christians to think the personified version of evil is the chief or only form of evil in our world. We often think of evil as a personal adversary tempting individuals to stray from the path we know God wants for us. Now, of course, the personal nature of evil is real. Temptations we face as individuals often seem tailor-made for us, as these were for Jesus. An inclination or habit or attitude that is less harmful in someone else may be deadly for us. That's why in baptism we renounce all sinful desires that draw us from the love of God.

But this personalized view of evil has often blinded us to a bigger reality. Evil is much more than a guy in a red suit whispering in one ear. Evil is also the systems of greed and exploitation and division that are all around us like the water in which we swim. Often, we do not even realize evil is there. Many of the systems around us are evil, not just the people who perpetuate the systems. So in baptism, we also renounce the spiritual forces of

wickedness that rebel against God and the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God.

When we hear this lesson about the temptation of Jesus, we need to see the devil as a stand in for the totality of evil. Yes, Jesus was battling against personal temptation. But he was also struggling against the evil powers of this world. He responded out of that cosmic struggle.

In this case, the devil offered bigger prizes than a fiddle made of gold. Food and survival in the wilderness. Expansive worldly power. Fame and notoriety.

Note that every one of these temptations had a potential good side. You could justify any of them. Turning stones to bread was a quick way to feed the multitudes, who were indeed hungry and desperate. Jumping off the Temple would draw attention to Jesus so more would hear his message. The most interesting of the three to me is the idea of accepting the glory and authority of the kingdoms of this world. The devil was clear that they were in his control, which is pretty scary if you think about it. The claim in the gospels is that the entire Roman system and all the kingdoms of this world were tools in the hands of the devil. Yet the devil was willing to give all of that authority to Jesus.

You could make a case that Jesus should have taken it. Later in the gospels, it seems that some who followed him wanted him to exercise that kind of power and be that kind of Messiah. They wanted him to seize political power so that he could change the evil system. The crowds who welcomed him like a king on Palm Sunday, shouting Hosanna, save us, may have wanted that very thing. Here in the wilderness, all it would have taken was one moment of worship, one moment of yielding and maybe Jesus could have taken charge and defeated their enemies and redirected government and made life better for everyone.

But Jesus said no. One does not live by bread alone. Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him. Do not put the Lord your God to the test. Jesus had a different vision in mind. He wanted people to feed each other and worship the Lord and not wait for God to rescue them.

When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

I offer three observations from this lesson to help us resist the evil in us and around us.

First, believe and know that the devil can be beat. The Spirit of God working in us through baptism gives us the same power Jesus had to resist evil and sin and injustice. Through baptism, we have been born anew to life in the reign of God, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. The devil is no match for the power of love working through us and around us. But while we can stand on this good news like bedrock, we should not expect evil to go away forever. *The devil departed from him until an opportune time.* He would be back. So we must keep resisting evil and keep turning to Jesus and never give up hope. Like the devil's fiddle music in Charlie Daniels' song, evil is nothing compared to the power of love.

Second, one of the ways we resist evil is through the same tool Jesus used – knowledge of the scriptures. The scriptures show us God's dream for the world and how far short we fall of that dream. They call us to create the world Jesus envisioned, where God is worshipped and people are cared for. They remind us over and over that evil does not have the final say. From the Exodus to the prophets to Easter to Revelation, the scriptures scream a hope that does not disappoint. People do sometimes twist the scriptures, as the devil did in this passage. They try to turn the Bible into good news for me and bad news for you, which is not the point. But when read faithfully, the scriptures overflow with the promise that the struggles of this moment are not the final story. They give us the power and confidence to identify evil in our own time and stand against it. So to resist evil, we

must read and digest the good news we find in the scriptures. And if we read something that does not make sense, keep reading until it does. Wrestle with the text until it gives us life. In the wrestling, we become stronger, better able to resist.

And third, the gospels point out that the devil came to Jesus at a vulnerable time. After his baptism, the Spirit led Jesus to the wilderness where he did not eat for forty days and forty nights. This is why Lent is forty days, not counting Sundays. Jesus was hungry and tired and lonely and beaten down. So, of course, that's when the devil showed up. Evil always preys on the vulnerable. The evil powers of this world harm vulnerable people the most. So one way to resist is to care for the vulnerable. When we care for people who are trapped or beaten down or abused or ignored, we give evil less room to work. The Great Litany gets it right: Strengthen those who stand, comfort and help the fainthearted, raise up the fallen, and finally beat down Satan under our feet.

The season of Lent was originally a time to prepare for baptism, to prepare for a lifetime of resisting evil and turning to Jesus. So, take your prayer books and turn to page 302. And here on the first Sunday in Lent, let us remember the first promises of baptism.

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 your 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.

Grant, O Lord, that all who are baptized into the death of Jesus Christ your Son may live in the power of his resurrection and look for him to come again in glory; who lives and reigns now and forever. Amen.

+ + +

<https://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/how-charlie-daniels-came-up-with-devil-went-down-to-georgia>

<https://www.songfacts.com/facts/the-charlie-daniels-band/the-devil-went-down-to-georgia>

+ + +

©2019

Grace Burton-Edwards
St. Thomas Episcopal Church
Columbus, GA 31906
StThomasColumbus.org