

Year A, Lent 1
Genesis 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11
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Beating Down Satan Under Our Feet

Let us pray: Gracious and loving God, we ask that it may please you to strengthen us as we stand; to comfort and help the weak-hearted; to raise up those who fall; and finally to beat down Satan under our feet. Amen. (*From the Great Litany*)

I went to see my spiritual director this week, which is always a good thing but particularly at the time of a major transition, like the beginning of Lent. When we talk, she'll often ask me, "What do you think God is up to?" in whatever we're discussing. It's a great question because of the assumption running under it – that God is indeed *always* up to something with us. We are not alone, nor is God just standing idly by, watching. God is involved. The trick is to listen closely and figure out what God's intentions might be.

I think our Old Testament and Gospel readings today also lend themselves to this question – what do you think God's up to here? But along with that, I think we might find a second, more unsettling question also slithering out of these stories: "What do you think *Satan* is up to – and how, and why?"

First, let's look at what God might be up to. We've heard both these readings so often that we might miss how odd these stories really are. If you walked into St. Andrew's this morning as an outsider to Christianity and listened to these stories with fresh ears, you might well ask, "Why in the world would God act like that?"

In the reading from Genesis, God has finished the ultimate masterpiece, creating the heavens and the earth. God has created humankind from the dust of that earth and given them a share of paradise, even trusting them to steward the new creation. But no sooner is this system in place but an agent of evil creeps into the picture. The serpent comes to Adam and Eve and convinces them that they can get around God's clear instruction not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God has said earlier, in no uncertain terms, that "in the day that you eat of [this fruit], you shall die" (Genesis 2:17). But the serpent appeals to their vanity. He says it's not that God will kill them; it's just that God doesn't want any competition – and if the people eat of this fruit, then they can be like God. As we know only too well, the serpent's smooth talk wins them over. But lurking around the edges of this story is a huge question: What was the serpent doing there in the first place? Why did God allow an agent of evil to disrupt the paradise that God had just created?

Hang onto that question for a minute because, in the Gospel reading, God's activity gets even stranger. The reading begins this way: "After Jesus was baptized, he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil" (Matthew 4:1, Revised Common Lectionary). If you stop and think about it, that's a fairly appalling statement. It is the Spirit of God, not some force of evil, that leads Jesus into the wilderness so that Satan can tempt him. And this only becomes harder to understand when we look back just a couple of verses in Matthew, at the story of Jesus' baptism, which we heard four Sundays ago. The last line of that story has God proclaiming out of heaven, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well-pleased" (Matthew 3:17). And then, in the very next breath, the Spirit is driving Jesus into the wilderness

for some personal time with Satan. If that's how the Father treats his friends, as Teresa of Avila said, perhaps it's no wonder he has so few of them. But why would God do it?

This may sound heretical, but I think evil has its place in bringing us into a loving relationship with God. We are a different kind of creature than the other beasts in the garden. God could have made us like my dog, Jenny. Jenny is a great dog, a great companion. All I have to do is look at her, and she gets all excited. She gives herself to us fully – and, honestly, she would have done the same thing with any family that adopted her. But does she *love* us? No, not really. Love is a choice, an exercise of free will; and you can't choose to love unless you have the choice not to love. By the same token, we can't make the choice to love God unless we have other choices available to us. So God allows the serpent to appear in the midst of paradise. And God sends Jesus out into the wilderness for a guaranteed encounter with "the tempter" (Matthew 4:3). Even the Son of God has to make the choice to claim the gift of the Holy Spirit and return the love that was poured out on him in his baptism.

And, of course, so do we have to make that choice. The pattern Jesus shows us is the pattern for our own lives – sometimes we revel in the Spirit of Love washing over us; sometimes we trudge through the wilderness, seemingly alone; and sometimes we're confronted by a force we would prefer not even to name. These are moments of decision. We may think of them in terms of choosing what's "right" versus what's "wrong," and that's true, in a sense. But I think it's really a matter of making the choice to love and honor God – or not.

Well, how about the other question: What might *Satan* be up to, in these readings and in our own lives? Satan is a rather shadowy character here, the most "crafty" inhabitant of God's good creation (Genesis 3:1) – showing up intentionally at our worst moments, finding cracks in our defenses, slithering in when we're too distracted to notice. It's no accident that the serpent appears when Eve's eyes fall on the most attractive fruit in the garden. It's no accident that the devil comes to Jesus at the end of his 40 days' fast, when he's at his weakest. As the saying goes, timing is everything.

So then, what does Satan do with us in our times of temptation? Most often, it's *not* that Satan offers us something clearly evil. In fact, I think most often what we're offered is exactly what we understand that we need the most. In fact, what we're offered may well be something that, under different circumstances, would be very good for us and for the world. Think about the first reading: There's nothing bad about the knowledge of good and evil – in fact, it's part of how we understand ourselves to be made in God's image. The problem for Adam and Eve was the process by which they obtained it. And in the Gospel reading, there's nothing at all wrong with what Satan was offering to Jesus. Bread in the wilderness? Sure – God had given bread in the wilderness to the people of Israel for 40 years in their journey to the land of promise. Protection by God's holy angels? Sure – in fact, the angels come and minister to Jesus as soon as his confrontation with Satan is over. Dominion over all the kingdoms of the world? Absolutely. We look forward to the coming reign of Christ all the time, even asking God for it directly every time we pray, "Thy kingdom come."

The problem with Satan's temptations usually isn't in the outcome; the problem comes with short-circuiting the process of getting there – functionally making ourselves God. In Jesus' case, it must have been very tempting to demand outcomes on his own schedule – bread when he was hungry, angels flying to his rescue when he was in trouble, his reign on earth complete in the blink of an eye. But God has reasons why it can seem to take so long for us to get to the places where we know we're meant to be. Remarkably enough, God knows better than we do how to give us what we need. And when we short-circuit that work, when we try to jump ahead

in the narrative of our own lives, we open up spaces through which Satan can creep in – even in situations that seem perfectly good, even holy.

For me, it was in what seemed like the holiest part of my life that Satan wormed his way in – at church. When we lived in Blue Springs, nine or 10 years ago, I was working as a medical editor. It was fine work, and it was going well; but I knew this wasn't what God had in mind for me to be doing. I had begun to discern a call to ministry, and I was feeling great hope that maybe, in the priesthood, I had finally found what God had been trying to show me for a long time. Well, I figured that if this was the work I was supposed to be doing, I should do as much of it as I could, as soon as I could. So I got on the vestry at church; I designed special publications; I agreed to be on the Stewardship Committee; and I took over the job of publishing the church newsletter – all this in addition to taking a promotion at work, with more responsibility.

All these were wonderful things to do, but my sense of priority was awful. In the midst of rushing into all this holy work for God, I managed to alienate my wife. Ann and I weren't very good at dealing with problems in those days, so our problems escalated before either of us realized how bad things were. Our marriage could have easily fallen apart in that year. Love was imperiled on all kinds of levels – our love for each other, our relationship with our children, the likelihood that I would actually become a priest. Satan had tempted me with the prospect of being more than I was at that point in my journey. There wasn't a thing wrong with any of the ministries I was trying to do. What was wrong was the way I did it – insisting that I alone knew best about what I should do, functionally playing God. And the consequence – nearly the end of our marriage – was a natural outcome of listening to the tempter's voice and demanding that life happen on my timeline, not God's.

Our hope here comes from imitating Christ's model, as always. Through our baptisms, we've been transformed from naked, vulnerable, isolated creatures into God's own beloved sons and daughters. We are filled with the same Spirit that let Jesus overcome his temptation to fast-forward through the rigors of human life. At each step along the way toward becoming what God has in mind for us to become, we're given the chance to choose faithfulness over our own quick solutions. And when we do, when we make the choice to let *God* be God, then each step along that path becomes an opportunity for us indeed to beat down Satan under our feet.