

“A More Opportune Time” by Deborah Sokolove

February 17, 2013



The First Sunday in Lent

A few days ago, we marked our foreheads with ashes, reminding one another that we come from the earth and, one day, sooner or later, each of us will return to it. We do this to remind ourselves of the most basic reality of our lives, that each of us must die. We do this to remember that our life is bound up with the life of not only every living creature, but of the entire planet; that we are made of the same stuff as the earth itself. We do this to mark the beginning of Lent, a season with its roots in some of the earliest practices of the church. We do this to join our story to the story of Jesus, as we learn along with him what it means to be God's beloved, chosen child.

Last week, the lectionary had us up on the mountaintop with Jesus and a few of his disciples. With the disciples, we watched as Jesus became radiant, glowing like the sun. With Peter and James and John, we listened as a voice said clearly, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

Today, the lectionary takes us back to the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, to the moments immediately after that first

time that he heard the voice say to him, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." It is no accident that these two stories follow one another. Together, God's approving words and Jesus' temptation in the wilderness testify to a basic belief of Christianity—Jesus Christ is both fully human, and fully divine. So in today's reading, we find Jesus dripping wet from his baptism in the Jordan, and filled with possibility, as he is led (some texts say "driven") by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness.

The wilderness in the Jordan Valley is a bleak, barren desert, with scarce water, food, or shade from the relentless sun. After forty days, Jesus must have been so hungry that he was almost ready to eat the stones, even without the Devil suggesting it to him. However, as we know, he resisted that foolish notion, relying instead on God to sustain him.

Still after being alone all that time, even the Devil must have looked like good company, especially with promises of authority and glory. Again, Jesus chose to worship God rather than give in to the seductive power of fame and fortune.

Finally, Jesus was tempted a third time, this time to throw himself off a high tower. Even famished and lonely and depressed, he had more sense than to dare God to keep him from killing himself. So, we are told, the Devil went away "until a more opportune time."

What is that "more opportune time"? To the best of my knowledge, we never hear any more in the Bible about Jesus being tempted by the Devil. Yes, in the garden of Gethsemane he pleads that the cup of crucifixion be taken from him; and when he was dying on the cross people taunted him, saying "well, if you are the savior, why don't you save yourself?" But the Devil doesn't show up in person, so to speak, and these are not named as temptations. So what "more opportune time" is the Devil waiting for?

One possibility is that it is our lives, both as individuals and together as the church, that provide a “more opportune time” for evil to prevail over good. As I have said many times, I believe that when we say that the church is the Body of Christ, it is no mere metaphor or figure of speech. We—you, me, the people in the church down the street, everyone who has ever committed to following Christ—we together are the hands, feet, eyes, ears, heart, stomach, skin, bone, and muscles of the risen Body of Christ now living on the earth. Gives me shivers just to think of it!

But if we, together, are—as our Stewards Commitment Statement says—the “universal, grace-filled body of Christ,” the church is also a “fragile earthen vessel.” As an earthen vessel, this local church, as well as the Church Universal, is full of cracks and patches, attesting to the many times and ways that we have broken faith with our commitments, our convictions, our love and care for one another and for the world in which we live. And—just as mysteriously as Jesus Christ is both fully human and fully divine—as members of this grace-filled yet imperfect vessel, we as individuals are somehow, simultaneously, God’s beloved, perfect children, and also our mistake-prone, limited, mortal selves. So I’m guessing that we—individually as members, and corporately as the Body—provide the Devil a lot of “more opportune” times.

Now, I do not want to get into debates about whether the Devil is an actual being, a convenient way to talk about the impersonal forces of evil, or a projection of our own shadowy impulses. Nor do I want to argue about whether Jesus was already part of the Godhead from the moment of conception, took on divinity when he was baptized, or simply lived in such intimate connection with the holy that people around him knew God in knowing him. These are all questions that my seminary colleagues in Systematic Theology address in their classes and writings, but I am more interested in the story, both as we have received it in scripture and as we continue it in our

lives.

Of course, as modern, educated, post-Enlightenment people, we generally think of the Devil as a metaphor, a character in a story, or a psychological projection. But, sometimes, I am quite certain that I see him grinning up at me from that luscious-looking double-chocolate brownie, saying "just one won't hurt you!" Or enticing me to raise my voice in anger, saying "they will do what you want if you are louder than they are." Or inviting me to give up in despair when I am depressed, saying "you are worthless anyhow, why don't you just kill yourself and be done with it." I'm sure that you can fill in your own examples. The Devil doesn't have to wait long for opportune times.

In the rhythm of the church year, Lent has historically been seen as an opportune time to practice resisting the blandishments of the Devil, the temptation to give in to our least admirable tendencies. Conceived as a time to follow Jesus into the wilderness of prayer and contemplation, it is an opportunity to renew the practices that help us repair the cracks in our commitments, to mend the broken places in our convictions, to restore the missing pieces in our love and care for everyone and everything that we touch. It is a time for reflection, for introspection, not as a self-indulgent exercise, but rather to prepare us to live more fully as members of the Body of Christ, reflecting the image of God in everything we do.

This year, I got a kind of head start on my Lenten disciplines. A few weeks ago, I began a program of spiritual exercises in which I have been challenged to make my relationship with God more direct, more personal, more connected with my immediate circumstances. For many years, I mostly have prayed wordlessly, seeking the voice of God in inner, as well as outer, silence. When asked to pray for someone, I would do so not in the form of explicitly asking God for any outcome, but rather with an inner gesture of

lifting that person or situation upward, or an inner vision of holding them in the light. Although I frequently address prayers to God on behalf of the community in the formal language of liturgy, I have rarely talked directly to God about my life, my needs, my desires, my fears, my temptations. Indeed, despite the visions and mystical experiences that I have been granted, and the daily miracle that every morning I wake up and breathe and walk and talk and live, I spend most of my daily life as a functional atheist. I mostly make decisions based on my personal preferences, on what is convenient, or on what seems like a good idea at the time. If it's a big decision, I might talk it over with Glen, make a list of potential benefits and disadvantages, run it past a couple of friends, or even bring it to my mission group. But God has rarely been an explicit part of that process.

The spiritual exercises that I have taken on include some very pointed questions about how I live, and how I understand God. As I began to write out my answers, I was confronted with my own hypocrisy and self-deception, and realized that I needed to change. Now, I find myself beginning the day with what in other circles might be called "setting an intention." Whether or not I take time to journal or meditate, there is always enough time to say "thank you" for waking up this day; to ask God to guide me; and for the strength to do what I understand to be God's will. I don't always say all of this out loud—maybe I should!—but I do make these explicit thoughts, not just some muzzy, fuzzy feelings. And I have found that if I do this, events or conversations that might have been difficult seem much easier, and the day goes well for me. This is not magic—it's not that I don't have problems or issues. Nothing has really changed in my outward circumstances. I still have more to do than there is time to do it; I still get interrupted regularly by my staff, students, and colleagues; I still have days when I'm tired, cold, hungry, or just out of sorts. However, much to my surprise, my response to these challenges changes when I ask to know God's will in each

situation. When I remember to ask God to tell me what I should do, and for the strength to carry it out, I find myself more patient, more loving, more generous than I can ever be in my own power.

Sometimes, asking God for help when I have a decision to make feels silly, but I am discovering that nothing is too small for God's guidance. One day, as I was getting ready to go to work, I was dithering about whether to make a salad or take a frozen meal for lunch. I suddenly realized that this decision was taking up much more time and energy than it deserved, so I said out loud, "God, I'm supposed to ask you for help in all my decisions. So here I am, asking." And, not terribly surprisingly, God gave me the answer right away. Salad.

Not all decisions, of course, are so trivial. And many, big and small, seem to be between two competing goods rather than a clear-cut choice between good and evil. Even so, it seems to me that if I practice on the little ones, it will feel more natural when the big ones come around. And by asking God to help me and accepting the help that comes, I more frequently choose the way of integrity, of love, of compassion, rather than the easy path of expediency, self-will, or despair.

The spiritual disciplines or exercises that we take on for Lent are not meant to be short-term fixes for our lives. Rather, Lent is intended to be a kind of jump-start, a way to get us going again when our spiritual journey seems stalled or stale, or—to mix a metaphor—to glue us back together when we feel more like cracked pots than grace-filled vessels. The spiritual exercises that I am doing these days do that for me, and I anticipate that by the time Lent is over they will have become seamlessly integrated into my life, as necessary to my spiritual and psychological health as physical exercise and good nutrition are to my body. Just as I go to the gym most mornings in order to keep my muscles and joints moving, daily self-examination and reliance on God keep me alert and responsive to both the brokenness and the beauty of the people

and situations around me.

Most of us probably didn't hear a divine voice or see the Holy Spirit descending like a dove when we were baptized. However, like Jesus, we are God's beloved children. And, like Jesus, sometimes we are driven into the wilderness, where we must face the Devil's offers of food that does not nourish; of illegitimate power or unearned wealth; and of daring God to save us from our own bad choices.

When Jesus was tempted like this by the Devil, we are told, his response was 'One does not live by bread alone'; 'Worship the Holy One, your God, and serve only God'; and 'Do not put the Holy One, your God, to the test'. And the Devil left, to wait for a more opportune time.

As we enter into Lent, let us keep the Devil waiting. Let us, instead, take this season as an opportune time for practicing the ways of integrity, love, and compassion towards ourselves and towards one another, conscious that God is helping us in our practice. Let our Lenten practices open our hearts towards learning and doing the will of God, so that we may more fully be the grace-filled Body of Christ, broken and blessed for the healing of the world.