

**THE FIGHT AGAINST THE DEVIL, SIN AND TEMPTATION**  
Psalm 32, Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7, Romans 5:12-19 & Matthew 4:1-11

The devil came to Jesus at the end of his 40 days of fasting in the wilderness when he was at his most tired, hungry and vulnerable. The serpent spoke with Eve in the garden perverting what God had spoken to her about the tree from which she was forbidden to eat. The *devil*, the *snake*, *Satan*: called by many names we meet the *evil one*, the *accuser* of the faithful, in today's scripture lessons and he or it is very cunning. We not only meet the devil, we also face the loss of innocence, brokenness, separation and death, all emanating as effects from Sin. On this first Sunday in Lent we confront the powers that would break and destroy us as God's people. We see the beginning of the spread of the cancer of evil, the dissolution that would tear apart the goodness of God's intent for creation. We confront the powers that would tear us apart from God, deny our own true selves and lead us to eternal death. And we also face the ongoing daily challenge of temptation to sin. Pretty scary and serious stuff to have to deal with! As Mother Julia was fond of saying, "*life on earth is not for sissies!*"

A bishop on vacation was traveling through a rural and remote part of the country. At a gas station he had a chat with an old farmer and he asked him what faith he was. "*I'm Piscopal*" the old man replied. "*That's surprising,*" said the bishop, "*there aren't any Episcopal Churches nearby. How did you happen to become an Episcopalian?*" "*Well it was like this,*" the farmer replied. "*I was visiting my cousin in the city and walked by this big old stone church one Sunday so I went in and they started this prayer where they said that they had 'strayed like lost sheep,' they had followed too much their own 'devices and desires', they 'had offended against (God's) holy laws', they had 'left undone those things which they ought to have done' and they 'have done those things which they ought not to have done'. And I said to myself, 'that's my fix exactly!' Ever since I've been Piscopal.*" That is our *fix* exactly, which is why we confess our sins each week.

But many deny or have a hard time comprehending their sinfulness. *After all I'm a pretty-good person. I haven't killed or caused bodily injury to anyone. I may not be a saint but I'm alright.* So, where is the standard, the measure of goodness we're supposed to measure up to? Draw an imaginary line from the perversity of Steven Hayes and Joshua Komisarjevsky, the two criminals who invaded a house in Cheshire, CT, brutalized, raped and murdered the daughters and mother, beat up the father and left him for dead as they set the house on fire, and then continue the moral line from that low point up to the goodness of Mother Theresa. Where would you put yourself on that line? Most of us would put ourselves closer to the saint than the criminals. But where on that line is the point of *good enough* where you can at least be OK? Actually *good enough* is nowhere to be found on that line. In fact the righteousness that God expects is way above Mother Theresa. Jesus is the standard by which we are called to live and all of us fall completely short of it.

The Psalmist in today's Psalm came to that realization. Denying his sinfulness he held his tongue. His bones withered away, because of his groaning all day long. He felt all dried up. His sense of guilt and separation from God was the cause. Confession was the remedy. "*I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord. Then you forgave me the guilt of my sin.*" The weight of sin was lifted. He could experience that, *Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven, and whose sin is put away! Happy are they to whom*

*the Lord imputes no guilt and in whose spirit is no guile. He could trust God and be helped by God. You are my hiding place; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance.*

An interesting thing to note in the Psalm is that this self-confessed forgiven *sinner* places himself among the *righteous*. How can that be? How can a *sinner* become *righteous*? Apparently through forgiveness. It is not the virtuous who are *righteous* but rather those who recognize and confess their sins, turn from them and receive the joy of God's forgiveness who are *righteous*. The way to righteousness is not through virtue but rather through confession, forgiveness and the subsequent change of heart.

The gift of restoration and forgiveness the Psalmist experienced is the grace that Jesus came to bring to all people. "For as in Adam," Paul wrote, sin and death came into the world. Through Jesus, the new Adam, life comes into the world. Through the one's sin death and dissolution came into the world. Through the one's death on behalf of all people, life and forgiveness and righteousness has come into the world.

So, in the fight against sin and temptation and the evil one it is important to recognize who we are. We are sinners in need of God's forgiveness. But in the transformation of that confession and forgiveness it is also important to remember *whose* we are. We belong to God. I love the way the poet George Herbert described that grace in his poem, *Love*.

*LOVE bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,  
    Guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack  
from my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning  
    If I lack'd anything.  
'A guest,' I answered, 'worthy to be here.'  
    Love said, 'You shall be he.'  
'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,  
    I cannot look on Thee.'  
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,  
    'Who made the eyes but I?'  
'Truth, Lord; but I have mar'd them: let my shame  
    Go where it doth deserve.'  
'And know you not,' says Love, 'Who bore the blame?'  
    'My dear, then I will serve.'  
'You must sit down,' says Love, 'and taste my eat.'  
    So I did sit and eat.*

Despite receiving God's grace and forgiveness we are still assaulted constantly by temptations. Life remains a battle. Even Jesus was tempted. In the Letter to the Hebrews Jesus was said to be tempted in every way just as you and I are, but without sin.

The accuser tempts us by inviting us to enjoy something that is good in a wrong way. Eve could see that the forbidden fruit in middle of the garden was a delight to the eyes and to be desired. But neither she nor Adam were prepared for the knowledge that fruit contained. They did not physically die, but the sense of innocence, of trust and

closeness to God and to one another was lost. Something in them began to die and wither away.

The accuser wants to pervert our way. The desire of something good and pleasurable for its own sake is a good thing. But the desire to possess that pleasure, to let the achievement of that temporary pleasure be more important than other relationships, is the perversion of the pleasure. The accuser wants to lead us down the path that leads not to life, but to destruction. The goal of the accuser is to imprison, to lessen our ability to choose the good, to ultimately imprison our wills.

The accuser is a liar. All of us face temptations. The lie of the accuser is that we don't have a choice. The interior voice of the accuser says it's inevitable; *I'm going to eat that chocolate even though I'm no longer hungry and I'm trying to lose weight.* The accuser leads down a path of self pity and failure. The accuser says that we have no choice so we might as well give in to the temptation.

*"Do not be like horse or mule,"* the Psalmist tells us, *"which have no understanding; who must be fitted with bit and bridle, or else they will not stay near you."* God gives us freedom. God gives us the choice for good or ill. But God also gives us grace. Sometimes it is the grace of strength to choose the better thing. Sometimes it is the grace of weakness where we realize we have lost control and we need to ask for help. And help is available, from God, from friends, from others who face the same temptations and understand the struggle. Falling deeper and deeper into the pit of despair is not inevitable. The accuser does not have the upper hand. God does. We are not alone.

We are loved. We are all sinners, but we are sought out after and loved by God. We are forgiven, even when we fall again. But we are always in a battle, the tempter is always at hand. So we need to listen to the voice of the Beloved instead of the voice of the accuser who would tear us down.

*"I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"* the Psalmist proclaimed. *Then you forgave me the guilt of my sin.*  
*Therefore all the faithful will make their prayers to you in time of trouble; when the grate waters overflow, they shall not reach them.*  
*You are my hiding-place; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance. ...*  
*Be glad, you righteous, and rejoice in the Lord; shout for joy, all who are true of heart.*

For the Lord has a way of life for his beloved and he invites us to live ever more deeply into it. There is a constant battle, but our Lord is the constant victor.