

First Sunday in Lent  
Year A 2023

The Devil is a Bad Consultant  
By the Rev. Salying Wong

Shall we consult the devil? If you were thinking about going public, would you consult the devil? On this first Sunday of Lent, our story rewinds closer to the beginning of the Gospel. For the season of Epiphany, we went from the baptism of Jesus to the calling of the disciples to the Sermon on the Mount to the Mount of Transfiguration. But, now we are in Lent and on the first Sunday we rewind back to the beginning of Jesus' launch of his public ministry. Essentially, he announces this campaign at his baptism. But, rather than continuing the story with the call of the disciples, with preaching and teaching as the lectionary does, the next scene according to Matthew is Jesus consulting with the devil. He goes to the devil's office, which is the wilderness, to talk about how he will be able to finance the operation, how he will deal with public rejection, how he will gather a crowd and grow his numbers.

The devil offers several ideas. "So, Jesus, I see you're going places! The crowds will LOVE you. The image of the carpenter from backwards Nazareth—people will love the underdog story. The problem is that you won't have much capital to fund this. I suggest you turn stone to bread whenever you're hungry. Just snap your fingers. People will swoon over your power. It is a win-win. You will get to eat and the crowd will eat it up!

"And rejection. Yes, negative press is part of the game of fame and power. But since you're following your calling, you deserve some special protection. You should be kept safe and secure. It's what you deserve for putting yourself out there and for all your hard work! So I say, tell God *your* terms. God would want you to. In fact, God promised this in the Psalms—he will not let your foot dash upon a stone. If you think about it—it's really about faith. I mean, faith would mean that you could throw yourself off the top of a tower and God would save you. In fact...why don't we have you do that. It would be a better spectacle than your baptism and boy people would listen to you then!

"And, finally, because you're so talented and faithful, I see you running a mega-movement. BHAG Jesus: big, hairy, audacious goal. I see you commanding a massive audience: Hundreds, thousands, millions. Forget the dusty roads and the itinerant way. Or, better yet, just walk about the people for a few months, build your base, and then...you should run for president!"

Jesus heard the devil out. He had to admit what the devil said made sense in a kind of way. He'd certainly seen success come to those who grope for power and control, safety and security, esteem and affection. What if the movement he wanted to launch would fail because he didn't follow the advice?

Ahh, there it was—there was the specious seed in the devil’s advice. It lacked any trust in God. In fact, the devil defined faith as magic, as power over God, as a transaction with God. All the shiny promises that led to power and control, safety and security, esteem and affection, they were soul-decay wrapped up in a bow of success.

And turning to the devil, Jesus said, “I heard at my baptism the truth: ‘you are my son, my beloved.’ I don’t need anything else. Away with you! You’re a terrible consultant for the Kingdom of God. I’m not hiring you!”

And the devil’s feelings were hurt and his anger mounted, “I tell you what, Jesus—Every time you heal someone and feel the sweet power in your fingertips or when you see the adoring faces of people listening with rapt attention to your teaching or even when you face people’s nastiness, you’ll hear the echo of my advice in your head! You’ll ask yourself, ‘How do I get more of this and less of that?’ You’ll be back! Everyone always comes back to me because I’m in everybody. I sit in everyone’s wounds. There’s nothing more convincing than the voice in the wound. So, good luck with your trust and your forgiveness and with your grace. People love their egos more. In fact, they love their wounds the most.” And the devil left his office until an opportune time.

Every first Sunday in Lent, we consider the temptations. Even though we like to make them mythic, the reality is the temptations are pedestrian. They are so familiar that it’s hard to know we are under their influence; we are caught in their net before we understand there is a net. Thomas Keating, that contemplative and student of the interior life, says that we each have a wound from before the age of reason, based in some hurt or privation. Perhaps we did not get enough esteem or affection, perhaps life felt out of control, perhaps life felt unsafe and insecure. As we grow physically, some interior part of us will always seek to fulfill these needs of our primary wounds. The problem is that the ways we seek to fulfill these needs usually takes us on a circuit of greater and greater bondage to suffering, rather than the happiness we seek. For example, if the esteem energy center is triggered, we first feel hurt by insult or lack of recognition and that hurt starts a series of integrated thoughts and feelings, like cogs and wheels bond together: we are affronted, then we can draw some conclusion about what we know about that person, then we can be tempted to hurt them back by demeaning them, and our anger can grow so much that we would want to hurt them or even better that the world would be better without them and that person ought to die. It is a terrible way to live because it demands the world change before we are happy.

Anyone of us who have ranted because of hurt feelings, who have shut people out because of hurt feelings, who have demanded someone to change, knows the temptations. These are all manifestations of the energy centers of esteem and affection, safety and security, and power and control. What wounds do you have that need healing? Is it family generated, is it marital, is it friendship? Is it more generalized, is it injury due to oppression and violence?

In the invitation to a holy Lent that we heard on Ash Wednesday, it exhorts us to self-examination and prayer. Lent offers us a way to notice how our unhealed wounds distort

our identity and relationships. Left unhealed, the search for esteem and affection, power and control, safety and security can preoccupy us, possess us.

So, it is really important to seek healing there. One of the most important ways to heal is to forgive. Forgiveness releases the power of the wound to control our lives so that we might take up the love of God with nothing in between. Forgiveness is not easy and not quick—as the *Book of Forgiving* by the Tutus will teach. But it is freedom, which is what God wants for us.

So, take time this Lent to consider. If you're not ready to forgive, pray for the willingness to be willing to forgive. If you're not ready to give up ranting, pray for a desire to stop ranting. Pray for the day when you can release the aching grip and find you don't need the pain anymore. You have God and God is all you have.