

Bruton Parish Episcopal Church
The First Sunday in Lent
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March 10, 2019

Most of us hold an overly simplistic and naive view of evil. When we hear the word evil, our minds take us to extreme examples. Hitler is often invoked as one of the great evil figures of the 20th century. The acts of terrorists are described as evil. Evil holds a unique place in our psyches.

In our imaginations, all things have a source. The Hebrew Bible tells us the story of creation, and its goodness. God is the source of the activity that leads to all that is. Likewise, we need a source of evil. In the Christian tradition, we name evil incarnate the devil or Satan.

The stakes couldn't be higher in the face-off between good and evil. The tradition has spoken of the opposing forces of salvation and damnation. God and the devil appear to be locked in combat with all hanging in the balance.

In a way, this is a reassuring and convenient approach. It lets us off the hook. If there is a larger drama, then I am not really significant in it. I might be a sinner. I might miss the mark. I don't participate in anything that rises to the level of being labeled evil. The issues are macro, but I am just micro.

The temptation of Jesus is a challenge to our easy peace with evil.

There is a lot of detail in the temptation of Jesus. The individual temptations are significant. Each one represents an obvious attraction for us. Power, wealth and misplaced allegiance for the sake of gain are desirable and expedient. Many sermons have been preached on the individual temptations.

The temptation of Jesus is a fundamental challenge to Jesus' nature. The devil wants to make Jesus a taker. The devil attempts to entice Jesus into taking each element of the devil's offer. The devil is trying to subvert the grace of God in Christ that is at heart about giving. Grace is about giving freely. Jesus refuses.

Deuteronomy illustrates the nature of the relationship between God and the Hebrew people. We have the giving and receiving of the law, and the sealing of the covenant. The reading from Deuteronomy is a window into the sense of self of the children of Israel.

This particular part of Deuteronomy conveys a liturgy. It is pretty specific. The people upon entering the land, given by God, take up the first of the harvest, go to the priest, who reminds the realized promise of God. The people then offer the first fruits to God. This picture of worship reminds the people of God and God's gifts.

I wish this wasn't the First Sunday in Lent, but pledge Sunday. The faithful returning to God a portion of the abundance they have received is good stewardship stuff. Remember that.

What we are talking about at its core is the orientation of God and the faithful. The fact that God is the first giver, Jesus refuses to be a taker points us in the direction of giving to remember. When we give in all parts of our lives, we are more than generous. We are participating in the life of God.

Taking. Well, taking aligns us not with good, not with grace, not with God. Perhaps, all that we would identify as evil comes from taking.

Giving is a different way. Giving is God's way. Our awareness and reception of God's gifts has the power to change us. Accept the gift. Be a gift.