

## Adversary

Throughout the drama that has gripped us over the past year, I have found myself thinking a lot about the temptations that Jesus faced in the wilderness. I have thought about the way that leaders in the church relate to the power structures and the politicians in our government. Whether we set ourselves up to endorse the power or to stand against it, whether we pray for the success of our leaders or whether we pray for justice, or maybe we just pray that those two things are not mutually exclusive. As the year has gone by, I began to wonder if maybe, as followers of Jesus, we aren't just barking up the wrong tree entirely. There is a virtual certainty that we are failing the tests that the Adversary is putting in front of us.

The first: self-interest, feed yourself, satisfy your desires. That's the most basic temptation we have, look out for number one, do what makes you happy or maybe slightly less selfishly, do what you need to survive. There has been a lot of that on display over the past year: what can this politician or that politician do for me and mine? Which scheme is going to work out better for me? A lot of people approach life with this sort of self-interest at the front and center of their worldview, but one does not live by bread alone. I think, this particular temptation is so successful it almost never needs escalation, but just in case...

Next comes the test of one's ego: if you are who you say you are, prove it. And this time Satan's got his own scripture to back it up, the Devil reads the Bible too you know. This also is a powerful force in our world today, where politicians are often blessed as the chosen of God or cursed as Satan himself, when in reality they are neither of those things. We often judge who "God has chosen" based on who wins, however, we ought to be really careful about that. In looking at Jesus, but also in the stories of the prophets and the OT, we see actually that those who God uses and guides are often the ones who run into the biggest obstacles and have the least ability to climb out of it on their own. Following God can be hard enough without taking someone up on a stupid dare. When we do feel the need to justify ourselves rather than trust and rest in our identity as the Body of Christ, our propensity to do violence in the name of god(s) gets turned up. But even if we dodge that there is always the last bit.

And this is perhaps the aspect of this that has been the most convicting for me vis-à-vis the political situation: the thirst for power. I'm not talking about Bond villain type thirst for power, where you want to take over the world or blow up the moon (for some reason). I'm talking about the real world desire that many of us have for things to go the way we think they should, because that would really be best for the world. What I realized is that, when you fail the two previous temptations, the third becomes almost unavoidable. When you are run by self-interest and ego, you inevitably think that your opinions and your ideas are vastly superior to whatever alternatives might be out there, including God's options. In fact, while the story is told as a sequential escalation of temptation, I think the third temptation is the real goal in the first place: to get humanity to worship something other than God.

Jesus is given the option of ruling the world, making all the injustice and the brokenness go away. He is offered the very throne that the Messiah was supposed to have. What would have happened if he took that offer?

I think the answer lies in who is making the offer and also in the terms of the deal. Now, I have a pretty good idea what most of us picture when they hear the word Devil or the name Satan. Depending on how many horror movies you have watched your vision probably ranges from a cartoonish red character

with horns and a tail, to some probably darker vision the demon personage. The Bible is actually rather thin on information about the Adversary, which is literally what the Hebrew word Satan means. Devil is much more of a Greek idea, and implies a more specific sort of moral antagonism than we actually see from the Satan in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Let's start with Satan. His main appearance is in the very old and rather different book of Job. Some Bible scholars suspect that Job is one of the oldest pieces of literature contained in the Bible. Their evidence for this is the fact that Job is not pronounced to be one of the "chosen" people of God. In fact Job is from a land called Uz, which is not part of Israel, and may not be intended to represent an actual place at all. Job gets pulled into the middle of this cosmic bet between God and Satan. Satan is not, strictly speaking, God's enemy, but rather a subordinate being who has the audacity to call God's wisdom into question. Specifically, God's ignominious involvement and care for human beings. Satan doesn't see much to love about humanity, and God defends them on the basis of Job's character. This is essentially the dispute that Milton puts at the center of Paradise Lost. Milton's Lucifer and the fallen angels rebel against God because they feel like these disgusting little mortal things are not worthy of the Glory of Heaven with which God has touched them: "Though under hope of heavenly grace and God proclaiming peace, yet live in hatred, enmity and strife among themselves and levy cruel wars, wasting the earth, each other to destroy..." Maybe we deserve an Adversary...

This is very much the tradition that the story of the temptations operates within. This time though, something unusual has taken place. Jesus of Nazareth is the one being tested. In previous iterations of this narrative, whether it was the serpent in the garden or Satan testing Job, or whether it was one of the less supernatural sorts of temptation, people always failed the test. Job failed when he questioned God, just as the Satan said he would. Jesus does not fail the test.

If Jesus had taken the bait on any of these temptations we would be lost. Don't even bother trying to put yourself in his sandals, these temptations are not for us, they are tests for God himself. They are the proof of concept for God's entire experiment in humanity. If we were to fail any of these temptations, and we do, I know I do, we would just be sinners, and God's grace could still redeem us. If Jesus fails...

Let's just say I'm glad we didn't find out the answer to that question.

Here's the thing though, when we do face these temptations: selfishness, arrogance and craving power. We have a choice now, to follow the example of Christ and go his way, or to give in to the Adversary. These temptations get new window dressing every time, but they are simply repackaging the same old junk: feed your stomach, feed your ego, and last but not least feed your need to be in control. And the thing is they're not just incremental either, it's not like the tempter just rolls from one on to the other, he is testing the flaws in our very being. These are the ways that we try and try to live without God, or even usurp God's plan. Our freedom, our will, our very agency turned against us.

Those things are always with us in some way or another.