

*The Lessons Appointed for Use on the*

## **First Sunday in Lent**

**Year C**

**RCL**



Romans 10:8b-13

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

Luke 4:1-13

### The Collect

Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

## Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16 Page 719, BCP

### *Qui habitat*

- 1 He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High,  
abides under the shadow of the Almighty.
- 2 He shall say to the LORD,  
“You are my refuge and my stronghold,  
my God in whom I put my trust.”
- 9 Because you have made the LORD your refuge,  
and the Most High your habitation,
- 10 There shall no evil happen to you,  
neither shall any plague come near your dwelling.
- 11 For he shall give his angels charge over you,  
to keep you in all your ways.
- 12 They shall bear you in their hands,  
lest you dash your foot against a stone.
- 13 You shall tread upon the lion and adder;  
you shall trample the young lion and the serpent under your feet.
- 14 Because he is bound to me in love,  
therefore will I deliver him;  
I will protect him, because he knows my Name.
- 15 He shall call upon me, and I will answer him;  
I am with him in trouble;  
I will rescue him and bring him to honor.
- 16 With long life will I satisfy him,  
and show him my salvation.

**Romans 10:8b-13**

“The word is near you,  
on your lips and in your heart”

(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

**Luke 4:1-13**

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” Jesus answered him, “It is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him.’”

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’

and

‘On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.



## SERMON

On this, the first Sunday in Lent, we need to re-examine what we understand about temptation, and that means we need to bring Satan in for an examination. You don't hear much about Satan in mainline churches. We're pretty convinced that Satan is a character from an older, simpler time. There's also the suspicion that if we admit a Satan, we have built in an escape hatch for ourselves. "The devil made me do it." I've told you before that I'm not comfortable avoiding ownership of my sins by wiping them off on a devil. I think there's more than enough fallibility and misdirected emotions in each of us to explain the evil we do. Nonetheless, it is sometimes useful to use a language that has some impact if we are to understand the important questions of our relationship with God's Creation, and the language of demons and devils has a great deal of impact indeed, so

long as you don't fool yourself into creating devils for yourself.

You see, our culture sort of primes us to misunderstand almost anything I could say about Satan, and I'm well aware that our culture speaks to you more loudly than I ever could. If I tell you something that conflicts with what you have always been told, you will believe what you have always been told and not what I told you. Simply put, we all live within our own realities.

I'll show you what I mean. I was mall walking this week behind an elderly man who was making good time. When we got to the food court, he stopped and painfully bent down to pick up a penny. He proudly told me that it was the second penny he'd found that day and said that he gives them to the Sunday School. He lives in his own reality, one in which a penny has value even though in truth Canada has stopped making them and



they are going the way of the farthing and the ha'penny in this country. Now — a little test: how many of you are arguing with me in your head right now that even a penny is worth something? If I tell you something that conflicts with what you have always been told, you will believe what you have always been told and not what I told you.

I have often urged you to confess that the picture of God you have in your mind — the one of the old man in the white robe on a throne — is really a creation of your mind. God can't be contained within your imagination. I need to be fair, then, and say that the image you have of Satan, whether the comical guy in the red union suit or one of the more frightening ones, is similarly a creation of your mind, existing there to help you conceptualize what you cannot comprehend. When we forget that these images are just training wheels for our limited,

human minds, then imagine these two creations of our minds in a struggle for the world we reach one of the culture points where we can easily go off the rails.

Imagine for a minute that God and Satan, as we picture them in our imaginations, really were in a fight for ownership of Creation. Does this not mean that Creation, the world, us, is larger than either of the combatants? Doesn't that ring klaxon horns in the critical thinking part of your mind? Our culture seems to want us to be dualists – people who believe in two cosmic powers in a terrible battle for ownership of the world on the order of UK v. Duke. I understand that desire. It's much simpler that way, but that could only occur between relatively equal combatants. Do we really believe that Satan is up to taking on God?

So, if we discipline ourselves not to be hijacked by these caricatures of God and Satan that we construct for

ourselves to give us a way to think about things too great for us, and look honestly at temptation, what can we say? One obvious thing we could confess is that we're tempted to do destructive things more often than we'd like to think, and so we **don't** think very much about the destructive things we end up doing. Instead, we find rationalizations for the bad things we do that make them seem like good things — thereby making things immeasurably worse. Satan is pleased.

I was casting about for an example of this principle when, to my great surprise, the Sexton came into the Chapel of St. Starbuck this week. We haven't seen him for a great long while, as he has been on a missionary trip. He shared a story of a woman who thought she smelled something burning in her house. In a panic, she went from room to room looking for fire. In every room, the smell was very strong, but nothing was on

fire.

Finally, she came to her desk. Under the desk was her dog, rolled up in a miserable ball. This close, she realized that it wasn't a fire she smelled – the dog had been skunked! He had run all over the house trying to get away from himself, finally curling up under her desk in misery. In so doing, he had spread the stink all over the house. Satan doesn't tempt us to do bad things. Satan helps us to convince ourselves that we can run away from the evil we do because he knows that as we try to get away from ourselves, we'll just spread the stink wider until it is all over the house.

It's convenient to divide the world into good people who are tempted, but do not surrender, to the urge to do bad things and bad people who don't even try to resist temptation, and do bad things just for the glorious joy of it. It's convenient, but it is a dead end street. That

was never my experience in the courts, for instance. I'm sure there are exceptions, but in my experience, most of the people I dealt with didn't set out to do bad things. They generally had an explanation for what they were doing which was, in general, reasonable, if you looked at it through their eyes. They intended to go out for some quality time with their friends. Nothing wrong with that. They just accidentally had too much to drink and there was an automobile accident. Nobody set out to kill two young girls. It was an accident. Or, it's just not fair that everybody has nice things except me, and I can't have nice things because nobody will hire me and the game is rigged against me. Those who keep me down owe me something nice so that I don't have to focus on how awful my life is.

We want to believe that evil is a choice because viewing evil as a choice separates us from evil. Evil is

something chosen by other people, not by us, but that just shows us how proficient we are at hiding the evil we do even from ourselves. Satan, remember, is portrayed as a fallen angel. Evil is what happens when something good goes astray from or beyond its original purpose. Something good can easily go astray if we have no firm measure of good and evil other than our own conscience. As Proverbs reminds us,

All deeds are right in the sight of the doer,  
but the Lord weighs the heart<sup>1</sup>.

If your own sight is the only measure of your actions, you'll be able to do some pretty nasty stuff and still think yourself righteous while doing it. Do you doubt me? Look at the Westboro Baptist "Church" picketing the funerals of fallen soldiers. Do you think they believe that they are doing the devil's work? No, they

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<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 21:2

do not. They think they are doing the right thing. Their deeds are right in their own sight. Sin is our blindness to what is happening because we're applying our own measure to our actions and all deeds are right in the eyes of the doer.

All of us have been following the manhunt in California for Christopher Dorner, the ex-cop and Navy vet whose anger at LAPD's dismissal of him drove him to seek revenge. His commitment to addressing what he believed to be an injustice led him to the idea that the system which would not punish those he saw as having harmed him must itself be punished and this idea led him to permission to kill not only LAPD officers but Monica Quan and her fiancée. Quan was the daughter of former LAPD Capt. Randal Quan who Dorner blamed for his firing. He killed the retired Captain's DAUGHTER and her fiancée because he was so cer-

tain he was right.

So, if evil is something which happens when something good goes astray from its proper purpose, then every bad act has a twisted and distorted good intention at its center. Temptation is the urge to divert God's good plans for us to inappropriate ends. I was watching one of my cop shows this week. A woman had been pulled over for DUI. She failed the field sobriety tests and was going to get hooked up, but she said to the cop, "Please! I'm asking a favor. I volunteer here at the school and all over the place. I can't get arrested." She volunteers (a good thing) but then tries to use her good thing as a get-out-of-jail-free card. Her bad act of trying to use her volunteer work for her own benefit contains within it the twisted and distorted good act she started out doing. Didn't work, I might add.

Last week, I told you that the story of Jesus had to



be read back to front. Jesus came to die and be resurrected. Nothing “happened” to him apart from his very reason for existence. Anything that had the potential to divert Him from that purpose, however well rationalized, was the words of Satan. For this reason, when Peter tried to argue with Him Jesus responded “Get behind me Satan”. The temptations Jesus was presented with here all have within them a distorted and twisted good that have the potential to divert Jesus. Turn these stones to bread IF you think you’re the Son of God (Eat! You're so skinny! The Son of God should be seen as a skinny-minny? Maybe you're not the Son of God after all?) Behold the power of the kingdoms of the world. Divert yourself from the terrifying story you have come to live out, worship the easier path and all this is yours. (Think of the good you could do as king of the world!) IF you think you're the Son of God, prove it by throw-

ing yourself off the Temple (Some of us aren't so easily convinced, Mr. Son of God, so show us something to make it easier so that we needn't grow in faith).

In every sermon there is a place where the preacher stops preaching and starts meddling. This is it. This is the place. Right here. Jesus came to offer Himself as a living sacrifice on the cross. If you look with clear eyes, you will see that you have come to offer yourself as a living sacrifice as well, a living sacrifice to the compassion our culture does not extend to the disenfranchised. A living sacrifice to the needs of those who stumble through life with broken hearts. I told you once of the Lamed Vovniks. Jewish mystics insist that there are, at any one time, exactly thirty-six righteous men in the world. They are generally miserable themselves, but their compassion supports the very universe. No one knows who they are, not even themselves. You are

come to offer yourself as a living sacrifice, like that of the Lamed Vovniks.

For this have you been brought into the world. Temptation isn't an urge to do evil. It is a willingness to be distracted from your reason for being, however it is rationalized. It is not important the sort of language you choose to characterize our human state of sinfulness, whether you believe we are broken, or rotten to the core, or pawns in a game played by Satan. As you experience temptation, and you will, respond in the way Jesus did to attempts to distract Him. Be faithful to your call, church. Act always to rekindle the dead light in the eyes of those who suffer with the light in your own, if only for a moment, for by our love and compassion, we will be known as followers of Christ.

AMEN



*Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.*

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