

Lent 1 Year C: 9 / 10 March 2019
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
The Reverend Gary Cyr

“The choice we have is living an intentional life, one predicated upon God’s desire for justice and peace; not avarice and greed. An intentional life focused on the well-being of our neighbor and all creation; not on divisiveness and exclusion.”

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11
Romans 10: 8b-13
Luke 4: 1-13
Psalm 91: 1-2, 9-16

At a recent workshop I co-facilitated with a colleague, one of the participants asked an unexpected question: What is evil. Not what is it to be evil, but what is evil. I was more than a bit surprised since the workshop focused on crafting a rule of life and not contemplating the nature of evil. Needless to say, I found my thoughts running the gambit of possible answers and settling in on general conversation as a means of exploring the heart of this question.

In our North American culture, evil has developed many personifications and understandings. Several people that I know would have answered the question with a pat refrain. If I were to have done that, I would have been lying to myself and possibly lending despair to a searching soul.

For many people of faith, evil is the opposite of God, or, as I mentioned in that evenings discussion, the absence of God – particularly of God’s love. You see, evil is not necessarily an outside force opposed to God, an entity that acts as an advisory to God’s desires, a foil to God’s plans. Evil is a latten reality that lies at the heart of each and every one of us. Any one of us is capable of doing terrible things, horrible acts upon each other and upon creation. It led the philosopher Hannah Arendt to postulate the banality of evil where people can be led to take part in acts against humanity ignorant, blindly so, of the consequences of said acts. People follow orders, they follow the status quo, they follow the pied piper of never-never land unquestioningly and thus participate in acts of evil.

Evil as an outside force is simply a dualistic attempt to quantify such behavior. Here, the schools of philosophy, psychology, and sociology are theology's friend. Think, for a moment, of the phrase "the devil made me do it." A convenient scapegoat for behavior that diminishes or extinguishes life. We don't need the modern caricature of a horned and tailed being that leads us astray from God's will to explain evil. Good and evil are realities that exist within the human condition and is under the auspice of God. God is not the author of evil, yet evil exist as part of God's creation.

When I read today's reading, I was struck by how easy it is for us to see the devil as the one who tempts us into misbehaving. Here, I am reminded of the comic strip "Family Circus" and one particular time when the mother asks who broke the lamp and the children all say "nobody" while a shadowy specter is in the midst of them unnoticed by the mother with the phrase "nobody" written across its chest. This invisible specter is responsible. It's nobody's fault. In other words, it's not my fault, it's someone else's. No claiming of responsibility. How wonderful is that? Project that blame on something or someone else. And if it's a vile enough act, we blame the devil. How convenient.

The Greek word we hear translated as devil – *Diávolos* – in biblical Greek actually means slanderer. Only over centuries has it become associated with Satan, as God's subversive adversary. Judaism's non-binary world view didn't quantify it in such a manner. Jesus' understanding of the "slanderer" would be that of Lucifer, who makes a wonderful appearance in the book of Job.

Lucifer is a name that means "Morningstar" or "light-bearer." And in the story of Job, Lucifer acts as a prosecuting attorney; the one who sheds light upon Job's faults and failings. The one who tempts Jesus is acting in much the same way, by offering the same choice the first human – Adam – had at the beginning of creation. And what choice is that? To put God at the center of life or to put one's self there. Adam's choice displaced God as the source of all blessings, the one with whom we live and move and have our being. Adam displaced God with the "self," something we continue to live with to this day. We are self-made, self-sufficient, self-reliant, to name but a few instances. All that the devil is offering Jesus is worldliness, the bane of human existence and the true adversary of God's desire for right-

relationship. Jesus makes a choice, just as Adam made a choice, just as we are asked to make a choice.

The choice we have is living an intentional life, one predicated upon God's desire for justice and peace; not avarice and greed. An intentional life focused on the well-being of our neighbor and all creation; not on divisiveness and exclusion. This choice lies within us, and not influenced by an external character in a red union suit carrying a pitchfork. To blame such an entity is to shuck our own responsibility to own our words and actions, which do have consequences.

Is it really nobody's fault? Are we really just following the status quo, going along with what we are told to do unquestioningly? Can it be that simple? If Lucifer were to shed that all-revealing-light upon our life, would we be found not guilty of acts against humanity or against creation? Adam failed that test. Jesus did not. The choice we have before us is who do we follow: Adam or Jesus.

What is evil? Anything that distorts or destroys God's love for creation and for each of us is evil. Anything that separates us from kinship, from justice seeking, from honoring life as a blessing from a gracious Creator is evil. The choice really is ours: to see Jesus as the Life of the World, or to honor our ego-self. It isn't Jesus who is being tested. It is we who are being tested. May the Holy Spirit guide you into making a good, faithful, and prayerful choice.