

The Devil Made Me Do It
First Sunday in Lent—Year A
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About six years ago, I was professionally restless. I had been serving as a Hospital chaplain for five years, and I was starting to look around for a change. While flipping through some job postings, I saw one for an Executive Director position in a big fancy hospital system that intrigued me. I did not have the kind of management experience they wanted. I did not have the years of experience they wanted. I barely had the certification they wanted. But I didn't let a little something like that stop me. I spent several days polishing my resume and composing a cover letter. I collected and submitted the requested materials, and then I put the entire thing out of my mind.

Months later, I received a phone call. Imagine my surprise when they wanted me to come to the fancy hospital and interview. I dry cleaned my only suit, and I showed up determined to knock their socks off. And I must have done something right, because they called me back for a SECOND interview. And that, my brothers and sisters, is the precise moment when I lost my everloving mind. Right then. I went crazy. I lost all sense of reasonable perspective.

At that moment, I was under the spell of the what ifs? What if they give me the job? What if I get a bigger paycheck? A better office? More people reporting to me? What if I get nicer business cards with my name, my degrees and my title smeared across the front and back? What if I get an assistant?

I found the idea of all that prestige intoxicating. The temptation seduced me utterly for about a week. I was unpleasant to be around. I couldn't sleep very well. I shirked my work. I stared at my phone, and I wasn't very kind to my family. In short, I had been bedeviled.

The devil is not a popular topic of discussion for mainline Christians—probably less so for Episcopalians. We talk a little about Satan at baptism, but that's about the only place that this little demon shows up in our liturgies. The idea seems antiquated and maybe a little barbaric. The devil is an important part of our Christian tradition, so let's set aside our discomfort for the moment and dive into the story.

In Matthew's Gospel, the devil attempts to enthrall Jesus, quoting scripture and offering him dominion over the nations of the world. Jesus had been fasting and praying for forty days and was, presumably, weak and susceptible to the devil's wiles. The devil takes Jesus up to a high place, then up to the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem. The devil tempts Jesus, goads him to use his divine power to feed himself, to save himself, to perform a miracle. Jesus evades each temptation. Each time the devil attempts to get Jesus to do something, Jesus replies, cool as a cucumber, with a piece of scripture that flummoxes the devil's plan. You almost get the impression that Jesus wasn't even tempted in the first place.

Jesus seems to know something; he's playing something close to the vest. The devil offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, and Jesus does something surprising. He does not strike the devil down. He does not take rulership of the world. Instead, Jesus takes the devil's offer, ignores, and reminds us that "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.'" Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God. This is the reply of Jesus to the devil.

It turns out, the antidote to temptation is to love and to serve God. I suppose you could say that a life of service and worship keeps the devil off your back.

Remember that big job I started with? I've learned a few things since then. When I was in that interview process, it turns out that I didn't lose my mind. I lost something much more precious. I lost my God. And I lost my God to the temptation of privilege, of prestige. To my everyday devils. Pride. Vanity. Envy. Discontent. Entitlement. These were, and are, my devils. What are yours?

Which horned monsters tempt you to lose your God?

The everyday devils bring us to the pinnacle of the temple to the roof of this very church. They show us power; they show us riches; they tempt us with illusions. Cheap tricks. Remember what Jesus said, "Worship the Lord your God and serve only God." This will require us to be faithful. This will require us to be humble. This will require sacrifice. This will require us to ask God "to come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations," as the Collect today says. This is all easy to say, I realize. It's harder to do. I'm sure I'll be dancing with the devil on the rooftop again some day, probably sooner than I expect. I'm far too quick to forget Jesus' teachings. This is the beauty of belonging to a worshipping community like St. Mark's. We come together in this holy season of Lent to support one another as we wrestle with our devils and pray for God to drive away our temptations. There are some saints out there who might be able to go to a mountaintop, resist the devil and live into God's love. I'm not nearly that holy. I need the rest of you, my Christian sisters and brothers, to support me in my prayerful disciplines of worship and service to God. Because I never know when I might lose my God again. And, of course, we are not alone as we resist temptation. Christ is with us using our presence when two or three gather, in the water at our baptism, in the bread and in the wine at His table. This presence will strengthen us as we resist those everyday devils as a worshipping community, as the Body of Christ.

So, my sisters and brothers, remember that we have been invited to a Holy Lenten season of fasting, prayer and preparation. And remember also that these disciplines are the very tools we employ to worship and to serve God. And in this worship and service, we will find our eyes fixed on the God who lived for us, who died for us, who rose for us. Amen.