

Second Sunday in Lent, Year B
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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Many years ago, on Saturday Night Live, Dana Carvey invented a character who he called the Church Lady. Apparently, he pattered woman after the Lutheran matriarchs of his childhood. They were prim, proper, and vaguely disapproving of whatever fun you were having. The Church Lady was constantly criticising the behaviour of others — especially drinking, gambling, carousing, and otherwise doing those things that make life pretty enjoyable. She would ask people if perhaps it was Satan who made them go out and have a fun time, much to the laughter of the audience. As the sketch gained in popularity, we all knew that eventually, the Church Lady would get around to the topic of Satan in every bit.

Satan is a pretty strange topic for modern Episcopalians. It's an old word that means "accuser" and in the scriptures, sometimes we see a fallen angel, sometimes a member of God's court sent to tempt the righteous, and in the New Testament, we meet a foil for Jesus — a prince of lies who offers riches in exchange for loyalty. Whatever your conception of Satan is, it's likely informed by one of these images that comes to us from Scripture.

So if Satan is generally agreed to be a bad actor, why on earth would Jesus call his right hand man Peter by this terrible name? I've wondered if Jesus was being kind of dramatic, or maybe just having a bad day. Surely we have all had a moment in life where we wanted to say to a spouse or a beloved friend "get behind me, Satan!"

A closer reading of the text reveals that Peter was getting in Jesus' way. Or put differently, Peter was hampering Jesus' ministry to the people of Galilee. And, so, it wasn't so much that Peter was annoying Jesus. He was interfering with the healing of all the people Jesus was trying to reach in Galilee. I imagine a doctor on her way to the bed of a patient, carrying a life giving medication and someone stopping her to talk about something nonsensical. I imagine she'd yell too.

This scene is played out in literature and art repeatedly over the centuries — Get behind me Satan. People who have never been in a church have probably heard that rebuke, even if they don't know the specifics. I think in our imagination the quickness is the thing — the instant flash of anger that Jesus has for Peter and his violent temper. I can see the power of viewing the scene like this.

I wonder, though, if this episode, while dramatic, doesn't capture the ways that we end up rejecting Satan in our Christian lives. I'm sure there are moments of decision where we must put down our foot and refuse to budge, rebuking the devil and making our stand for Christ.

But most of the time, I think that the rejection of evil is the work of a lifetime, slow and steady. My brother is a fourth grade teacher in a gifted program, but in this time of COVID, he has been relocated to the lunch room, where we washes down tables and tries in vain to get primary school children to mask and distance. Sometimes he ends up being a teacher's aid in classrooms

crammed to the gills. He tells me that he keeps the mood light, lets the kids call him Chef Burch, which they like, and focuses on the emotional health of one kid at a time, the homework of one kid at a time, the success of one kid at a time. It is not glamorous work, and no one would probably ever paint it as a dramatic scene. But still, I think this slow, steady work is a rebuke of the devil, a renunciation of evil, of despair, of the creeping bleakness that can get into our lives.

And I know that many of you are doing the same — telling the devil to lay off in your steady, small, consistent way. Telling Satan to take a hike is the work of a lifetime, not of an afternoon. At last, not if you're not Jesus.

So reject Satan. Not Halloween style Satan with the records that get played backwards or the kids who wear too much eyeliner (as if there's any such thing). Reject the real forces of evil that enslave or destroy the people of God. Look for the places where the poor are being further disenfranchised from our society. Seek out places where money or greed are being privileged over the basic needs of the powerless. Find the hungry, the naked, the lonely, and the injured. Bring food, clothes, company, and healing. In these ways, you rebuke the devil and send it back into Hell. You can try garlic or a crucifix, but my money is on helping the poor.

It is a long game, this yelling at Satan. Jesus snapped at Peter one time, famously. But I think we are to keep harassing the devil our entire lives. We are, after all disciples, inheritors of the power of Jesus' friends. We really can bring healing. We really can help this world. We really can knock Satan to the ground, through the power of Jesus through which all things are possible. Amen.