

First Sunday in Lent, Year C
The Rev Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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I served my previous parish as an assistant priest on a pretty strict contract. I was there on a two-year revitalization grant, and as the months flew by, I was keenly aware that once the grant ran out, I would be out of a job. I found that prospect both exciting and terrifying. My terror at looming unemployment nudged me to apply to more positions than was probably wise. I spoke with churches in Baltimore, Seattle, Chicago, Portland, Milwaukee, and San Diego. Every day for about four weeks, I was either interviewing in person or on the phone, or hosting delegations from different cities. It was a real slog, and I found it hard to keep all those churches straight.

Of course, I remember St. Mark's, because this is where I eventually landed. But in the midst of the process, I found myself intrigued by the parish in San Diego. It was a big church in kind of a fancy suburb. And I threw my hat in, fairly certain that they wouldn't be interested in speaking with me. Imagine my surprise when they called, and not only did they want to talk to me, but I went through several interviews, including a site visit where members of their vestry came to Chicago to take me to dinner.

But, here's the thing. I think, at some level, I knew this church wasn't the place for me. And, if I am really honest, I think I knew it from when I read their materials. They weren't interested in the same things I was. Their commitments and values were different from mine. But somehow, I let myself be blind to the way that this church was not a good fit. How come? What was it that made me not listen to myself?

Well, it was my old, dear friend, the ego. The church in San Diego was large. The town was swanky. And, not to put too fine a point on it, the rectory had a pool. When I drill down into that part of myself that is a little greedy, a little selfish, and a little insecure, I can see that what I really wanted was to be able to say to my colleagues that "oh yeah, I took that church in California. You know, the one with a pool." It seems so silly now, looking back on it, but at the time, I was caught in a net of my own making. I should have said no on day one, but instead I kept the conversation going for a few months while I fantasized about drinking margaritas, poolside, in my own backyard.

Our Gospel lesson today was written 1800 years before Sigmund Freud, so the authors probably wouldn't talk about ego the same way that we would. In fact, they set up an epic and scary dialogue between Satan, the Father of Lies, and Jesus, the Lord of Life. In this dialogue in the desert, Jesus is offered dominion over all the kingdoms of the world if he will simply bow to the devil. Or, put another way, Satan is asking Jesus to reject God in exchange for worldly power and riches.

While there is a part of me that believes in external and personified evil, I also know that most of us don't have to look so far to find our failings. I do not need a dramatic scene with Satan to

know that I wrestle with demons every day. Mine don't have horns. Yours probably don't either. But I know you will recognize in the gospel the insidious temptation to lie. Because, of course, ultimately that is what the devil is asking Jesus to do. To deny the sovereignty of God is to deny something of ultimate truth. And so, Satan asks us to lie.

When I was a little kid, I really thought that the worst lie a person could tell was to someone else. But the older I get, the more I wonder if the lie that makes the devil the most happy is the lie that we tell ourselves. I think, for a few months, I was telling myself that I would work with a church, even though we had nothing in common. I was telling myself that a shared vision doesn't matter as long as the salary is right and there's a cabana boy. I was being so foolish. And I wish I could say that I am now always immune to the sweet words of temptation. But of course, I am not. And you probably aren't either, to some extent or another.

So, what does a Christian DO when that voice is so sweet, so tempting. What do we do when good ol' Satan starts to whisper and to invite us to lie? Well, Jesus' answer is to surround himself with scripture. Jesus quotes chapter and verse of the holy scriptures to the devil and blunts every probe. We're Episcopalians, so I know that we don't crack our bibles all that often. But I will tell you a secret: almost every word that we use in church comes from either the Bible or one of the early church mothers and fathers. So, in a way, to come to church is to surround yourself with scripture—is to insulate yourself from the lies out in the world.

I ate breakfast in a hotel the other morning, and so I had about 30 minutes to watch cable television. And by the time all those commercials were done, I had been sold just about every vile product imaginable: tummy tucks, hair darkeners, weight loss pills, and a subscription to a channel that is exclusively intended to watch men punch and kick each other in cages. Television is garbage, it turns out. I don't need satan to tell me lies; I have access to 300 channels that will do it for me.

And so, simplistic though it sounds, I think that antidote is here in church. Here we go slowly. Here we try to soothe our egos so they don't get the better of us. Here we reject the empty promises of the devil and try to surround ourselves with the stories of scripture for strength and consultation. So, be careful of the devil, my friends—even if he offers you a house with a pool. It is all an illusion. What is true and real is connection with friends and family, striving for justice, is a life of meaning, is a life of service, and, of course, is the worship of the one and holy God. Amen.