

The First Sunday in Lent, Year A
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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I'm not on Facebook much these days, but about six years ago I was at my peak usage and looking at my feed hourly. I remember a flurry of posts from an old high school friend who still lives in my hometown. She and her husband were posting photos of their hiking trips and early morning walks along with quotes about being blessed and the power of positive thinking. Artfully placed in some of their photos were packets of some kind of energy powder that they were, presumably, both using and selling. As the year went on, I noticed that they were attending conferences branded with the name of the energy powder, and then I noticed that a few other friends from my hometown seemed to be in on the scheme.

I found myself pretty skeptical for two reasons: I was skeptical that an unregulated and seemingly untested drink powder could make someone younger, healthier, sexier, happier, and more energetic. And I was also skeptical that this kind of sales structure would financially benefit the people in my hometown who I happen to know have little money and little education.

But then, after seeing post after post over the course of a year, I will admit I kind of found myself intrigued. Their happy pictures of watching sunrises on top of mountains while drinking energy shakes seemed quite the contrast to my life of long work hours and a general aversion to hitting the gym. As I sat there one afternoon, pretty tired from some meeting or another, I noticed that my friend had messaged me and asked if I'd like to try a free sample. And, I totally said yes.

The rest is pretty predictable. I tried the sample, and it was sugary garbage, and several months later, the company was shut down by the FTC, who alleged that the whole company was basically a ponzi scheme. My friends posted a mea culpa, and that was the end of that.

Put a pin in that story for a second while we shift focus to the readings, and, most notably Satan. We don't talk a lot about the devil in Episcopal circles. It can seem sort of old-fashioned or even foolish to spend time on this clearly pre-Enlightenment personification of evil. In the Biblical record, you have the serpent in the Garden of Eden, the fallen angel Lucifer, the tempter in the book of Job—lots of different ideas about who this shadowy figure is and how it functions in our religion. In the New Testament, Satan—a word that means accuser or opposer—tempts Jesus in the wilderness telling lies and twisting scripture. Satan acts like a foil or an antagonist as you might see in a play or a drama.

But for some reason, instead of reading the devil as the bad guy in the story this year, I had a strangely more sympathetic read. This is a little odd but hear me out. What if, the devil, instead of being the Father of Lies, is instead someone who finds themselves believing a lie with such conviction that he wants to spread it around? I have done this, and maybe you have as well. I remember in the 90s during the Gulf War, there was an incredible amount of anti-Arab sentiment floating around television and among some of the adults in my life, and I think that those lies started to seem like the truth to me for a while. Maybe you have been in a place in your life where you find yourself believing, wholeheartedly, something that later you realize was utterly

untrue. Sometimes a lie is so big and so powerful that it can feel impossible for one person to fight it. White supremacy in this country is the obvious example. But there are others. Think about all those forces in our culture that tell you you're not smart enough, or young enough, or sexy enough, or rich enough, or healthy enough, or busy enough. The list is pretty long. But this morning, when I think about the Satan in our story, I can't help but feel pity for someone who fully believes a lie. It is such a sad state of affairs, and I think it's more common than we know. After all, my high school friend is a good woman—yet she believed a lie so strongly that she got caught up in spreading it around. And even though I didn't end up buying her lie for long, I did ask for a sample. Who knows, maybe if the FTC hadn't stepped in, I might be shilling energy drinks from my trunk right now.

All of which brings us on a windy path to Lent. In these forty days, I think the church is asking us to tell the truth. To ourselves. To our community. To our God. I think the church is asking us to strip away those things that whisper falsehoods in our vulnerable ears. I think the church is asking us for a rigorous spiritual inventory to see where the cobwebs and the moths have clogged up and nibbled our spirits. It's hard to listen for the truth. I think it's why the church recommends fasting or prayer or silence—some practical way to create the space we need to discern the true from the false in our lives. And, to find a way to say that we are sorry when we find ourselves believing and then maybe even selling a lie to our neighbors.

Maybe, next year I will go back to thinking about Satan as the personification of all that is evil in the world. That's a fair read and one that has interesting ramifications for faith. But this year, I'm going to choose to think that the devil got duped into believing some popular lies—that power is more important than love, that domination is the only way to organize our lives, that worship of status is more vital than worship of God. Lent invites us to some housekeeping—as individuals and as a community—to look at the places where we are deeply in line with what God has asked of us and those harder places where we are not. What do we as a community believe that is not true? What do we spend time and energy trying really hard not to know? We will spend this Lent looking at those questions and hopefully finding some answers. And, I would be remiss if I didn't say that—as always—even when our self-examination gets a little difficult or even when we need to repent of some lie or another, God is both the truest thing that we know as well as infinitely compassionate when we miss the mark. Let the Lenten project begin. Amen.