**All This**

*Rev. John Allen*

I imagine the devil putting his arm around a famished Christ, out somewhere in a wild barren land.

“I could save you a whole lot of trouble.” He whispers.

“You are too good for a life like this.”

“You are powerful.”

“Why starve yourself with fasting?” “Make theses stones into bread.”

“Why only tell people to have faith? “Prove God’s power to them. Right here. Jump off. And survive.”

“Why suffer and die? Why toil in obscurity, why live among the poor and the sick?”

“You could be a king? Think of all the good you could do for them then.”

“Bow down.” “Worship me”

“I will give you dominion over all this…”

Of course we have come a long way since when this story was written, right? We have come a long way from those old superstitions, devils and demons, curses and the like?

We have better explanations now.

A psychologist might tell us that all this talk of devils is a nod to the violence and malice that lives somewhere deep within us.

An anthropologist might tell us how societies tend to personify evil to help them explain how bad things could happen in a morally ordered universe.

A good biblical scholar might tell you that the word we translate as the devil in greek simply means the adversary, and it might be intended as a more general term.

And any theologian worth their salt will tell you that God alone has power over this world.

Incidentally, I would put myself in those camps too. I have never been much into Satan. These are parts of the Bible that I might gloss over. Or explain away as some kind of metaphor…

Charles Pierre Baudelaire, a 19th century French poet and essayist, once wrote “My dear brethren, do not ever forget — when you hear the progress of lights praised— that the loveliest trick of the Devil is to persuade you that he does not exist!”

A line adapted and made famous by Kevin Spacey’s character in *The Usual Suspects*. “The greatest trick the devil ever played was convincing the world he didn’t exist.”

I wonder if we have been tricked.

I wonder if we have accepted, at our own peril, the idea that the only organized force in the universe is a good one. And all the bad is just accidents and the sum of little sins.

Now, I do want to be clear. I see no evidence in our tradition that would support belief in a personified entity, with horns and a pitchfork, reeking of sulfur and wandering about meddling in our lives.

But those medieval images do represent something very real that people felt. They felt like there was some force in the world that seemed to foil their best attempts at being good people.

They felt like there was some force that conspired, rather creatively, to thwart love, and justice, and beauty at every turn.

I think that is what Jesus experienced as the temptation in the wilderness. Not a visitation from some mysterious being. But a visitation from that all too familiar whisper.

Have you ever heard that whisper, like the one Christ heard in the wilderness?

“If you tell her the truth, there is going to be nothing but trouble… Maybe a little lie is better for now..”

or

“What’s the harm, everyone else is doing it…”

Or perhaps, have you lived with the dizzying contradiction of caring about Earth even as you pollute it? Do you wish your coffee and clothing came from sources that did not exploit workers, but, not quite enough to change where you shop? Almost like some little voice was whispering in your ear saying “One person can’t really make a difference.”

I don’t know about you but I often feel like all my best efforts to be a better follower of Christ in the world. To show love and justice to my neighbors. And care for God’s earth. All of them feel like they are resisted by something I can’t quite place.

Not a fallen angel with horns.   
  
Something more like gravity, a steady and persistent pull that holds me down and holds me back… And I don’t even notice it until I try to escape it’s pull.

And its not just at an individual level. It’s social too.

Think of the way that the world at best lurches toward peace and justice for all people. Think of the setbacks and the delays.

As an example, think about the legacy of racism in our country.

Think, as an example, of this country’s struggle with our legacy of white supremacy, from slavery, to segregation, to mass incarceration and the killing of unarmed black men, and boys, by the police.

We confront, again and again, the particular forms and institutions in which racism rears its head at any given moment. We struggle. And sometimes even over come.

And yet for all the advances and success, there is some force, bigger than any one institutions, or the attitude of individuals, that is pulling back every step of the way.

It’s like a whisper, that tries to persuade me that as long as I am ok, I can afford to ignore what is happening to others.

And I confess to you, that too often, I listen.

Look, I am not telling you that there is a literal devil out there lurking in the shadows. I am not trying to scare you into checking for deacons around every corner.

But I think that we would be foolish to dismiss the whole idea out of hand because it seems superstitions, our out-of-date.

If we accept the idea that the only organized force in the universe is toward good, we do so at our peril. Because experience tells us something quite the opposite. And I think that is what scripture is warning us about through this story.

Warning us about the whispers.

But it is more than a warning. It is also a guide. For Christ resists the whispers. The temptations.

He stands firm in his identity. He knows who he is. And he knows that God is the only one he will obey.

He knows that he is God’s beloved. He knows what he is destined for. He knows what he needs to do.

And by being clear about all that, and refusing to compromise, he is able to stand firm against the tempters whispers.

And all that goes for you too.

You are a beloved child of God. You are made in God’s image and God called you good.

You are beautiful the way you are, no matter what the whispers say.

You owe obedience to God, and no or nothing else that might try to convince you follow another way.

There is no reason good enough to do the things you know you shouldn't do. No matter how convincing the whispers might be.

What you do and how you live in the world *does* matter, and does make a difference. No matter what the whispers say.

All you have to do is what Christ did when the tempter came whispering to him in the wilderness.

Call the devil a liar.

And tell him you know better.

It’s easier said than done of course. This faith stuff always is. But its possible.

[maybe start to walk away…?]

Oh, and there is one more thing. A little line at the end, almost an afterthought.

“Then the devil left him alone and angels cared for him.”

Yet another reminder that God does not exist to shield us from pain, but God will always help us endure it.

Its a good reminder, that evil can scurry around in the shadows, and whisper all it wants.

We’ve got God with us.

A bright light.

And a mighty voice.