

1ST SUNDAY LENT - A
“In the desert”

We don't often speak of Satan, but this first Sunday of lent always brings him up. I suppose some of us would just as soon ignore the existence of such a being, but the fact of evil exists. At times it is so intense, that our Judeo-Christian tradition has even personified this evil as Satan, from the Hebrew word meaning "adversary." Matthew calls him "the evil one;" Luke, "the enemy;" and John, "the father of lies." He is especially opposed to Jesus, and seemingly triumphs over Jesus on Good Friday. But that's getting ahead of our story.

Satan is clearly the enemy of God. Now, just for fun, I want to ask a question. Do you think God loves Satan? How many say "yes?" How many say "no?" How many don't know or are afraid of being wrong and didn't raise your hand?

If we want to be consistent, I think we have to say that God does love Satan. Remember, it is with "agape" love, self giving love, not eros love. God does not not love any of his creation, including Satan. One theologian even maintains that God loves Satan as much as he loves any of us, even Mary. The difference is, and this is critical to our understanding of evil in the world and even in ourselves, the difference is that Mary accepts that love, and rejoices in it, while Satan rejects God's love and literally hates it.

Faith allows us to see our world as under the influence of God's love. Satan, on the other hand, understands himself and his world as

totally absent of God's love. Because God is love, and Satan is God's adversary, Satan's world is a world void of love. It is an empty world. For Satan, love does not compute. He had so emptied himself of it, Satan cannot even comprehend love. It is not a part of his being at all.

We can say that by contrast, Mary accepted God's love as much as is possible for any creature, and was filled with his love. Her life, in relationship to God, and in relationship to the rest of creation, especially to other human beings, was as close to an unconditional "Yes!" as is humanly possible. She said "yes" to life. Her life was a statement of what humanity could become if we lived a "Yes" to God and God's love. As the angel Gabriel say to Mary, "*With God, all things are possible.*"

Satan, on the other hand, in relationship to God and the rest of creation, is as close to an unconditional "No!" as is possible for a creature of God. Satan, when given a choice, says "No!" to life. His very being is a statement of what life can become if we all say "No!" to God. For Satan, all things are impossible. He is the greatest of all pessimists. In fact, he is the personification of despair. He is the one who says, "*It won't work. It can't be done. Life isn't worth living. It will be too much trouble. Give up! Quit! Life is cheap, to destroy it is a favor to the world. Who will miss one less mouth to feed?*"

In the great classic, "Dante's Inferno," there is a stunning description of hell. The core of it is not fire at all. It is ice. And the ice comes from the frozen tears of Satan who gave in totally to

despair. No wonder Satan is at odds with God, and anyone who is trying to live in God's love.

This brings up another good question. If God is everywhere, does that mean that God is in hell? Hands. Yes? No? Don't know? Again, we have to say yes, but it may be dangerous to think of hell as a place, as such. Rather than a place, what would happen if we think of hell as isolation from the love of others, especially from the love of God? In that sense, hell, in a way, exists for some, even now. And if they do not turn their hearts around, their hearts will be forever alienated from others, especially from God. And that is the hell of it.

Without the redeeming, forgiving love of God, we would be forever trapped in our sin. But, because of the love of God made manifest in Jesus, we can be free. Overcoming our sins, our fears, our discouragement, even our despair is possible. We can overcome the forces of death at work in us, and address our dark side with hope of living in the light. While Satan seemingly triumphed on Good Friday, Easter morning was just around the corner. But that's getting ahead of our story again.

In the desert, Satan tried to tempt Jesus with all that made sense to him. Mind you, he wanted to find out if Jesus was the Son of God. He didn't know. So he tempted Jesus with all that was tempting to him. From his viewpoint, God must be attracted to what was of value to him (her?). Remember, he could not comprehend love, not to mention a God of love, at all. So Satan appeals to self interest.

"If you are the Son of God, satisfy your hunger. Make bread from these stones like God made manna in the desert for the Israelites. Just a little miracle is all it takes."

Satan was appealing to Jesus' power as God. It didn't work. Self indulgence was not the driving force behind Jesus' life. Jesus used his power to give, not to get. The true nourishment needed to sustain us does not come from satisfying our bodies alone, but from our being open to the loving promise of God's mercy. Without self giving, agape love, we cannot be satisfied as human beings.

So Satan appeals to privilege. Certainly Jesus understands the value of status over others. It gives power, too, and influence.

"Throw yourself down, and the angels will catch you."

That didn't work either. Out of love for us, Jesus did not cling to his divinity, to the things of God. On the contrary, he became one like us in all things but sin, so much did he love us. He would not pull rank even to save himself. So Satan plays his ace.

"If you are the Son of God, I will give you everything, all the kingdoms of the world. All you have to do is worship me."

He was tempting Jesus to sell himself out for influence and possessions, as if his meaning came from being in control or from having great wealth. In response, Jesus, in effect, said,

"Without love, I am nothing, and power, privilege or possessions cannot make up for that. God alone deserves my homage for God alone is love, which gives life its deepest meaning. To believe anything else is a lie."

And with that, the desert experience ends. Defeated for now, Satan departs while the angels come to wait on Jesus. But Satan will be back.

Next week, we travel to the top of Mt. Tabor. But for this first week of Lent, it will serve us well to get in touch with that part of us that struggles with the love of God, or that refuses to love or accept love from others. If other things seem more important than love, that new awareness could be the beginning of a deeper conversion to God. May our celebration of the Eucharist continue the transformation of our hearts.