

First Weekend in Lent (RCL/A): "Remember! The Devil Is a Liar!": the Power of the Half Lie & the Power of the Whole Truth
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11
February 29-March 1, 2020
Holy Trinity Lutheran, Manasquan, NJ

The cartoon shows a fat snake coiled on a tree branch over the head of a woman who's holding an apple. The snake is saying, "I'm not sure.... I guess it's been washed." And the woman is -- ? Eve! (Germ-conscious Eve, apparently!)

What's the only thing worse than finding a worm in an apple? Finding half a worm in the apple 've just bitten into! Yeah, the awful sinking feeling that comes when we realize we've just eaten something disgusting....

"Forbidden fruit" is one of those terms in everyday English that many people don't realize is rooted in the Bible. The apple in the Genesis story is the original "forbidden fruit." God tells the first couple, Adam & Eve, they can have anything growing in the lush Garden of Eden, the Delicious Orchards of their time, **except** the fruit of one tree. Of course, that's the nibble they're tempted to take. The temptation is seen as coming from the outside:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made.
Genesis 3:1

In today's first lesson there's a temptation in the Garden from a serpent, and in the Gospel there's a temptation in the desert from the devil. We've come to associate the two. What's the line we hear in old cowboy movies? "You speak with forked tongue." Who has a forked tongue? A snake. Harry Potter fans will know the answer to this question: "What's the most despised house in Hogwarts?" Slytherin! Slither is such a nasty word. If I say, "She slithered onto the bar stool next to him," we all know that woman is up to no good, right? What slithers? A snake!

Evil has different names in Scripture, and is sometimes depicted as a snake, sometimes as a dragon. The devil is also referred to as Satan, which means “the accuser” (as in the Book of Job), the tempter, the deceiver, the adversary, the slanderer. In the preface to C.S. Lewis’ *The Screwtape Letters*, fanciful correspondence between a master tempter Screwtape and his young apprentice, Wormwood, we read this caution: “Remember, the devil is a liar.”

“Remember, the devil is a liar.”

- It’s the devil who says that God doesn’t exist.
- It’s the devil who says that the devil doesn’t exist.
- It’s the devil who says that I’m not answerable to Anybody for my actions.
- It’s the devil who says I’m special, and the usual rules don’t apply to me. The commandments are for lesser people, the masses, the spiritual *hoi poloi*.
- On the flip side, it’s the devil who says that God loves everybody **except** for me.
- It’s the devil who says I’m such a major league spiritual loser that my sins are unforgivable.
- It’s the devil who says that I’m such a spiritual screw-up there is no hope for me.

The trickiest lies, of course, are the ones that are part-truths. I **am** a sinner. But I **have** a Savior!

The devil spoke partial truths to Jesus, as he speaks partial truths to us. For example: as the Son of God, Jesus **could** have commanded stones to become bread. After all, at a later date the Lord will feed 5,000 men and their families, too. But in that instance He was serving others, not Himself. Jesus wasn’t going to use His miracle-working power to break His own fast in the desert, to serve up a meal to Himself. And maybe He **could**

have stepped off the Temple pinnacle 450 feet above ground and landed like a cat on His feet. He would later slip away unnoticed through a murderous crowd who wanted to fling Him off a cliff, and another one that wanted to make Him king. The miracles He performed later would be signs calling people to faith, like turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee and healing the man born blind – but he was not going to let the devil be the wind in His sails. Jesus allowed only the Holy Spirit to billow his sails and steer His path. And later Jesus does assert that He's been given "*all authority in heaven and on earth*" (Matthew 28:18), but trust, obedience, suffering compose the path He walks to get there, not spiritually selling-out, cutting moral corners or making political compromises. Our Lord Jesus is the best example of the power of love triumphing over the love of power.

The temptation in the Garden is the theological, metaphorical story of humanity's Fall from grace: Fall with a capital F. It **sadly** reminds us how easily our virtue folds like a house of cards when the devil reframes God's **commandments** as **suggestions** that are irrelevant, inconvenient, unenlightened. The temptation in the desert **gladly** reminds us that, as we read in Hebrews in the New Testament:

2:18 Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested... 4:15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Even with Jesus' help, even with God's grace, we will at times **fall** to temptation. In the front of our ELW we have beautiful, classic prayers, including one by St. Augustine:

O loving God, to turn away from you is to fall, to turn toward you is to rise, and to stand before you is to abide forever. Grant us, dear God, in all our duties your help; in all our uncertainties your guidance; in all our dangers your protection; and in all our sorrows your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen (ELW, p. 87)

We **turn toward** our Lord when we kneel here or at home or in the sanctuary of our hearts, and silently confess our sin, admitting our failures in love. We **turn toward** our Lord when we come to the altar, hands outstretched to receive the Body of Christ, broken for us, the Blood of Christ, shed for us and for all, **for the forgiveness of sins.**

“Remember, the devil is a liar.” It is the truth, not half-truths or half-lies, that will set us free. The truth is that we are sinners **and** we have a Savior, who died that we may live. The truth is that we chomp on a razor blade, not just a worm, every time we bite into forbidden fruit, but there is healing and forgiveness from on high. The truth is that we will never be able to earn God’s love **but** we don’t have to earn it because God’s love comes as a gift, not a reward. The truth is that we have screwed up in many ways, dishonoring God, hurting our neighbor, hurting ourselves, **but** God’s willingness to forgive will always be greater than our ability to sin.

The truth is: the Fall in the Garden was not final because of the gift of God in Jesus Christ. The Savior not the serpent has the last say! Amen

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