
What Is The Sin In Your Life?

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The First Sunday in Lent
Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

You all remember the story about President Calvin Coolidge, the man of few words, after he went to church one Sunday. A reporter asked him, "What was the sermon about?" Coolidge answered in one word, "Sin." "Well," the reporter persisted, "What'd the preacher say about it?" Coolidge answered, "He was against it."

One of the words for Satan in the Bible is "accuser." Another word for Satan is "tempter." We meet Satan, and we meet temptation and sin, like Jesus did, in the gospel for the First Sunday in Lent.

There have been many accusations against the Episcopal Church in our long history, but the worst form of those accusations has always been to say that our church does not believe in sin. To say that we do not believe in sin is dangerous indeed.

If we do not believe that sin exists, then we are truly ignorant. If we do not believe that sin exists, then we cannot believe that human beings are real. And, if we do not believe that sin exists, then we cannot believe that grace exists. And friends, let me tell you, sin does exist; but grace exists all the more.

Some of you realize, of course, that I prefer to speak of grace. The grace of God continues to surpass anything that I can even comprehend. That grace is what keeps me fascinated with God. I prefer asking people, "Where is the grace in your life?"

But today is different. Today is the day we walk with Jesus, not into the way of grace, but into the way of temptation and sin. Today we walk with Jesus into the temptation to sin.

So, today, I ask the question, "What is the sin in your life?"

I ask that question because it is the question that Jesus asked himself, when he retreated into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights. Where is the temptation to sin? Where is the sin?

And he found the answers, didn't he? Satan himself appeared to Jesus. I have no idea what Satan looked like out there. There was no video camera. There were no reporters. There was only Jesus and Temptation.

And Jesus discovered what his temptations were. The first was to exploit his power and position. The tempter came and said to him, "*If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.*" ("*Command this water to become a cup of Starbucks coffee*") But Jesus answered, "*It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'*"

Each of us has some position, some power, even the very least of us. And each of us is tempted to use that power for our own appetites. What do we want at the moment? Do we really need this or that? The tyranny of the urgent tempts us to exploit our power for something less than God.

Sure, Jesus was hungry. He had fasted forty days and forty nights. But he didn't need food in that time of anxiety. He didn't need a new car, or a new set of clothes, or a new house, or a new church, or a new loaf of bread, or a new cup of coffee, or a new something else. He needed the quiet humility of the Word of God. That is what he would live by.

It is what we will live by.

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, (Satan put Jesus on the top of the Cathedral bell tower!) saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

The second temptation was to turn the tables. The second temptation was to tempt God. I especially enjoy this temptation. Let's just see whether God really likes me. Let's just see whether God will protect me. Let's just see.

Oh, if it's not God we are testing, then we are sure testing one another, aren't we? We are sure testing each other's love. Let's just see if she loves me. Let's just see if he notices that I have changed. Let's just see if they really care.

What is your sin today? Is that it? Is it to put others to the test? Who are you putting to the test? Your spouse? Your lover? Your family? Ah, your school, your church, your country? Watch out: chances are the person you are putting to the test is the very person who loves you the most.

Jesus said, "Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

"Then the devil took him to a very high mountain (the devil took Jesus to the top of the Bank of America building!) and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

There sure are a lot of kingdoms in this world. I belong to a lot them myself. I belong to a family, a family with a long and distinguished history. Is that who I am? I serve on the boards of several very fine institutions; they lay a claim on me. I volunteer at all sorts of wonderful organizations. I belong to a neighborhood. I belong to a city and pay taxes here. I belong to a country and pay taxes to it.

These are kingdoms, and they are very fine ones. But none of them is worthy of my worship. Are they worthy of your worship? Some of us like to live on high mountains, where we can view all the kingdoms that we are part of. We've assembled quite a set of kingdoms. We're part of this. We're part of that.

But Jesus says, "*Away with you Satan! Away with you, you tempter. It is written, "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him."*

That is the great commandment. Our ultimate devotion is God alone. Our ultimate allegiance is God alone. Every other reality is only secondary to this great God, the God above all.

That's the way Jesus answered the third temptation. And as soon as he did, "*the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.*" Yes, Jesus faced down his Tempter. Jesus faced down his temptation to sin. And when he did, the grace of angels appeared.

No, sin is not fun to dwell on. Sin is not fun to look at. But it sure is real. Jesus knew that, and we know it, too, especially during this season of Lent.

Where is your sin today? Answer that question, find your sin, and the chances are you'll find something else. Discover your sin, and God assures us that you'll also discover God's grace.

Paul Tillich once said, "*Sin*" and "*grace*" are strange words; but they are not strange things. We find them whenever we look into ourselves with searching eyes and longing hearts. They determine our life. They abound within us and in all of life. May grace more abound within us! (Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*).

To which I add this postscript: Find the sin in your life, and immediately, suddenly, the grace of God's angels shall appear.

AMEN.

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