
A Friend of the Devil is a Friend of Mine

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A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
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The First Sunday of Lent, Year A

*"After he was baptized by John, Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil."
-Matthew 4:1*

I know that rock music is not a bad thing, just like I know that alcohol is not necessarily a bad thing. But sometimes, people have to give them up for a while. Some folks have to give up alcohol for Lent, or maybe forever. For me, it was rock music. I had to give it up for a while.

One year, I actually gave away all my rock music albums, because they were controlling me. Some of you know that I also play music; I once played piano and keyboards for all sorts of music. But way back then, I stopped playing rock music for a while.

Only gradually did I resume the old songs, when my life was steadier. But there was one song, one song in particular, that I never played. Many of the bands I played in knew the song. They all played it. But I did not.

In fact, I did not start playing that rock song until only a few years ago, when I actually played it at a Shrove Tuesday Mardi Gras party. The song was by a great old band called The Grateful Dead. What a name, right?

Maybe, by now, you know the name of the song I am referring to. It's called "Friend of the Devil." The chorus goes like this: "I set out running but I take my time; A friend of the devil is a friend of mine." It's really a great tune, but I refused to sing it. How could a Christian sing that? I could not bring myself to say that a friend of the devil is a friend of mine.

Then, on the First Sunday of Lent, I read this gospel again, from the fourth chapter of Saint Matthew. Those of you who show up for church every First Sunday of Lent surely know the story. It is the story of Jesus, being led out into the wilderness by the Spirit, where he was tempted by the devil, for forty days.

Here is what I realized that year. In the space of forty days, Jesus and the devil developed quite a relationship. Not that they didn't know each other already. But they sure got to know each other as Jesus went on a forty-day retreat of self-examination and prayer and contemplation.

I hope we all know that the devil is not the long-tailed fiery-red creature we see caricatured. The devil does not sit upon our shoulder with seduction and a pitchfork. We know that the devil does not fit all those stereotypes. But, on the other hand, most of us do not imagine either that the devil might just be a rather healthy conversation partner.

When I read this passage from Matthew, this marvelous passage of Jesus's conversation with Satan, it seems to me I am hearing the conversation between two wise and cagey spiritual sages. I think I am hearing two veteran rabbis, two religious

scholars, swapping bible verses, and making points with each other.

Listen to them! The devil says, "Hey, you're hungry; that's a natural need. Turn the stone into bread." Jesus responds with a citation from scripture, "One does not live by bread alone." Point, counterpoint. They are having a religious debate.

Remember, the devil uses scripture, too. He responds with his own biblical reference, "The bible says that God will command his angels to protect you; throw yourself down from the temple, and let God save you." And Jesus, again, makes the counterpoint; "it is written, do not put the Lord your God to the test."

Finally, the devil takes Jesus to see in an instant all the kingdoms of this world. They apparently belong to what Satan represents. "Worship me," Satan says, "and all this will be yours" Apparently, that is not a lie; the devil has real power in the kingdoms of this world. Jesus again responds with a reference from scripture: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."

This conversation is a spiritual debate. The suggestions of the devil were actually legitimate suggestions. After all, they would not have been temptations unless they made sense! "Earthly sustenance; making sure that God loves you; and material satisfaction." Those are the legitimate offers.

The first temptation: Bread. One always needs bread. One always needs food and earthly sustenance. But my sense of this first temptation was that Jesus was being tempted to exploit his power.

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 did not 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 steady humility of the Word of God.

The second temptation was to turn the tables. The second temptation was to tempt God. I especially sense this temptation in our world today. 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.

Is that your temptation today? 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 we are putting to the test is the very person who loves us the most.

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

The third temptation was to use the kingdoms of this world for material satisfaction. There sure are a lot of kingdoms in this world. I belong to a lot of them myself. I belong to a family, for instance, and to a neighborhood. I belong to good and honorable institutions; they lay a claim on me. I volunteer at all sorts of wonderful organizations. I belong to a city and pay taxes here. I belong to an honorable and incredible country and pay taxes to it.

These are kingdoms, and they are very fine ones. But none of them is worthy of our worship. 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. Every other reality, even the best of them, 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. And when he did, the grace of angels appeared.

I imagine that Jesus and the devil knew each other quite well. They knew each other's strengths and weaknesses. They

probably knew what each other was going to say. Jesus knows the devil. On another day that they were not having an argument, one might think they were friends.

Many of the great depth psychologists, the great psychoanalysts, follow Carl Jung's advice about knowing our shadow side. "Get to know your shadow side," they say. "Get in touch with your dark side." To put it simplistically: get to know your dark side so that it doesn't jump up and surprise you. Get to know your dark side so that you don't act out on those urges subconsciously. Maybe even make friends with your dark side.

In other words: get to know the devil. Maybe even become friendly with the devil. Take forty days, and go out into the wilderness. Stop your usual patterns of life, and explore who you really are for a while. That's what the forty-day wilderness experience was for Jesus. That's what the forty days of Lent are meant to be for us.

For a long time, I could not sing the song, "Friend of the Devil," and "A friend of the devil is a friend of mine." I let Jerry Garcia sing it.

But I do sing it these days. I sing it very seriously. The person who has been through the wilderness is someone I trust. That person is a friend of mine. The person who has got to know his dark side, his weaknesses, his vulnerabilities, his sins: that man is a friend of mine. A person who has become friendly with temptation and trial: that person is a friend of mine. The person who has battled through point and counterpoint in religious contests: she is a friend of mine. A friend of the devil is indeed a friend of mine.

Yeah, like Jesus. Jesus is this very sort of person. Jesus is a friend of mine.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip