

First Sunday in Lent 2026 – Lying Devil Genesis 2.15-17; 3.1-7, Matthew 4.1-11

I wonder how you felt during the Great Litany this morning, when we asked to be delivered from “the deceits of the world, the flesh and the devil,” and for God to “finally beat down Satan under our feet”? Many modern folk feel uncomfortable with naming evil this way. And yet, our readings today include a crafty talking serpent – who our tradition has come to name as Satan – and Jesus in the desert being tested by the same.

The power of these readings is that they show us why our desire to be faithful, good people can go catastrophically wrong. Good intentions are not enough. Of those people throughout history who did terrible things, very few of them did so out of a deliberate desire to do evil. Even leaders who order or carry out the deaths of millions of innocents generally believe what they are doing is necessary for their vision of the good to prevail.

The presence of the devil in today’s stories reveals that the temptation to pursue a destructive path begins *outside of us*. Most people genuinely do the best they can to live a good life. But we are *acted on*, daily, by spiritual powers bent on destruction, that use deception as a key weapon. Deception derails us. It activates our own weaknesses and broken desires, and sin is loosed on the world.

There are two fundamental truths that make us capable of being at home in this world: that God is generous, and God is good. When we are deceived into losing trust in those truths, all we have left are our own misguided and harmful strategies for getting by.

Let’s take a closer look at how this works. The serpent in the garden who’s “just asking questions,” seems innocent while deliberately planting a false idea. “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat *from any tree in the garden*’?” He knows full well that God has protected only one tree, but the force of this lie is to make God seem stingy and withholding.

The serpent then moves against God's character suggesting that God has lied. He effectively tells Eve that "God doesn't want you to become like him, knowing good and evil, he prefers it when you're ignorant because then he can control you."

Suddenly, trust turns to suspicion, the humans eat the fruit and the rest, as they say, is history. Eve's good desires for wisdom and nourishment are disordered by the serpent's lie. The fruit itself is delightful, but she reaches for it in a way that goes against God's clear command. Now we could get into the weeds here about why God put something so lovely in the garden with a "do not touch" sign on it in the first place. But at its core this story represents a decision. Given that God's purposes are often veiled from us, will we trust in what we do know of God's goodness, or will we let ourselves be distracted by an attractive lie?

We see this mythic pattern enacted all the time in our world, where trust in God and discernment of the truth are increasingly hard to maintain. We are tempted by distortions that appeal to our self-interest, and then in the pursuit of defensible goals we end up engaging in indefensible actions – the ends justify the means.

"If I were prime minister," says the politician, "I could really change things to help people. But I'm troubled by the compromises and backstabbing you have to do to get your hands on the levers of power..."
"That's just politics, it's what's necessary to play the game," says the tempter. "But you'll do *so much good* once you're in charge."

Or consider the mother whose unhappy past has made her believe that she's worthless and bad. This false belief makes her terrified that she'll contaminate her children. So she punishes, criticizes, and withholds nurture from them "for their own good." The serpent lives in her disowned shame, and in the lie that good character is formed by fear. She wants the best for her children, but her actions are almost guaranteed to produce the opposite of what she wants.

This politician and this mother are doing distasteful or harmful things that they believe are necessary to achieve what seem like reasonable goals – helping people and raising good kids. They've ended up there because they no longer trust in a God who promises to take care of the ends if we are faithful in the means.

And so we come to the desert where Jesus walks, hungry, but grounded in the voice that calls him beloved. Three times, he's presented with a possible way to put his calling into practice. Make food in the desert. Leap off the temple to be saved by God's angels. Become a great king over all the nations of the world. You can see how these signs and this level of authority could have been plausible ways for Jesus to fulfil his vocation.

But each of them comes with a hidden hook that sets him up to conduct his mission on his own terms. Wonder working that would set him apart from the everyday hunger of the people he'd come to serve. Manufacturing a crisis to force God's hand in rescue rather than willingly receiving the suffering and death that were his to undergo. Worshipping Satan...which is to say, relying on dominance and violence to shore up power rather than trusting in the hidden heavenly kingdom that grows from a mustard seed.

Jesus draws on the Scriptures to sharpen his discernment of the lies that tempt him from the proper fulfilment of his vocation. He refuses to adopt questionable means even though they would seemingly achieve desirable ends. And he maintains his trust in the will of God even if it would have been easier and faster to take matters into his own hands.

We may be sophisticated people who struggle to believe in the devil. But let's not be fooled. We are tempted by lies every day. Every day, we run the risk of succumbing to self-deception or a failure of discernment that serves our wounded desires for safety, control and applause.

When we forget about Satan we stop looking for the lies. We become complacent and cling to false narratives of human progress and our own essential benevolence, while casting suspicious glances at a God who just shouldn't have put that tree in the garden if he didn't want us to eat from it.

It may seem quaintly old-fashioned, but now is the time to take the Bible more seriously than ever. To grasp hold of the old stories, the myths that tell us who we are, the characters that we can look up to or whose mistakes we can learn from, and to be shaped and moulded by the truth of God's love, God's generosity and provision, God's forgiveness and grace. Yes, care is needed in interpreting our sacred text, or we can end up validating genocide or putting a cross on our army tanks. The serpent's fundamental insinuation, "is God good? Did God say...?" is woven even into our acts of prayer and Bible study.

We need to hold onto the idea that we are vulnerable to temptation from an enemy that wants to make us doubt God's care. This is especially the case if we are working toward a worthy goal, or feel called to serve God – whether as individuals or as the church. The more faithful we desire to be, the more we can actively expect to be tempted to fulfil our purpose through short cuts, self-reliance, or by diminishing others. This calls for discernment and for knowing deeply who we are, as children of a good and generous God.

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