



## SUNDAY SERMON

# Friend of the Devil

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With thanks to my friend and fellow preacher, Sam Candler, I turn to an unlikely source for interpreting our Gospel - a favorite band from long ago: The Grateful Dead, and a particularly fine song of theirs: "Friend of the Devil." The chorus goes like this: "Set out runnin' but I take my time, a friend of the devil is a friend of mine. If I get home before daylight, I just might get some sleep tonight."

Now when you were younger, your momma and your daddy, they warned you to keep away from those people who were friends of the devil. Maybe not in so many words, but they warned you to look out for those who would tempt you and do you harm. Well not me, not this preacher. It's the beginning of Lent and I say it's high time you and the devil got to be on friendly terms.

That's what Jesus did, early on. He'd just been baptized in the river Jordan where the Spirit descended upon him like a dove. Then that same Spirit led him up into the wilderness - to meet who? The devil.

Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights. That's a long, long, long time to be alone - alone in the wild with your self, your thoughts and fantasies and fears. Luke says simply, "afterwards he was famished." I'll bet! I've been to this wilderness - I mean literally; I've been there in Israel. It's a desolate place: rocky, barren desert; no trees or any living thing for as far as you can see, just dull grey brown rock and sand. Blistering hot by day; freezing at night. Jesus out there alone - with the devil.

Of course it's not like you or me going out there because Jesus is the Son of God. Then again, Jesus is also the son of man - fully human. I am thinking that during the course of forty days he probably spent more than a little time thinking about bread, thinking about eating pretty near anything. We've heard remarkable survival stories - people managing to suck a little sustenance out of the unlikeliest of sources; bugs and twigs. When the devil suggested "why don't you turn this stone into bread," that had probably already crossed Jesus' mind.

Same with his suggestion that Jesus throw himself down from a high peak to see if God's angels would swoop in and rescue him. To test God's love: "If God loves you - I mean, really loves you - God will save you." And by day fifteen if not before I imagine Jesus, fully human Jesus, had wondered about God's love, and God's Spirit leading him out into this God-forsaken desolate land. And he was tempted.

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### DATE

Lent 1  
Sunday, March 10, 2019

### PREACHER

The Rev. Ledlie Laughlin

Matthew 4:1-11

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The third temptation, the promise of political power over all the earth, plays to Jesus' potential desire to take matters into his own hands, get things straightened out. So after forty days and forty nights I picture Jesus and the Devil knew each other pretty well. I see them going at it like a couple of sparring debaters, philosophers, lawyers; two rabbis sitting opposite one another making points and counterpoints, each well versed in the scripture and the law and the teachings of the prophets. The Devil couldn't get him; he couldn't get Jesus to bite. And that, I tell you, is because Jesus knew that wily serpent's games; he knew his opponent's tricks. If you're gonna' beat the devil, you gotta' know the devil.

Now, first and foremost, the devil is a liar. In the sway of the devil, we are deceived, we are not able to see the truth, or discern and know the truth. In the sway of the devil, we are deceived, and we deceive ourselves, tell ourselves lies, lies about others, lies about God and the world, lies about ourselves.

Let's move this conversation from the wilderness out there to our own lives. You know that expression, "better the devil you know than the devil you don't know." Maybe you've said that, referring not altogether kindly to someone in particular. Why do we say that? Because the devil we know isn't so scary. We've been around them and learned a few of their wily ways and know - if not how to defeat - at least how to manage them, contain them. We are less deceived. The devil we don't know has the capacity and the power to surprise us, catch us off guard at a vulnerable moment.

Consider the devil's handiwork in a variety of ways:

Any time we perpetuate prejudice, we have to tell ourselves some lies - that "they" are different, or less than. We label some group of people to be sub-human. When does a person who commits a crime with a gun or bomb become a terrorist? In this country, probably when he or she is brown-skinned, or has a "different" religion or ethnicity. When does a group of people on the move become a horde or a riot? Generally, when "we" want to impose special sanctions more severe than we would impose upon "our own." Whenever we label a group, we deceive ourselves, create a story - a false narrative, and open wide the path to prejudice. The antidote to prejudice is truth. To come face to face, to see the other for who she or he is, a fellow human being, no more and no less.

A different situation. Some of you will remember the cartoon strip Pogo and his well-known adage, "We have met the enemy and he is us." Appropriately enough, that saying gained widespread popularity when used as a poster for Earth Day in 1970. Fifty years ago we knew our own behavior was desecrating and destroying God's precious creation. When it comes to care of creation, we have met the enemy.... But as so aptly named, this is "an inconvenient truth." So we perpetuate a lie. We tell ourselves, it is beyond our control; there's little we can do. Our resistance to the knowledge right in front of us, our capacity for self-deception, is breath-taking.

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It's not much in vogue to speak this way, but there's no question in my mind about the existence of evil, the presence of the devil, and the human capacity to commit sins against one another, against ourselves, against creation, against God.

Let's accept the church's invitation to the observance of a holy Lent as a season to face the problem of sin. This is not an occasion merely to pick at little personal foibles in the interest of self-improvement, fascinating as most of us find that to be.

Having said that, I would be remiss if I did not ask you now also to look within, for this is terrain in which the devil holds great sway, particularly when that liar's presence lies undetected. I won't presume to speak for you, but I know my own best intentions are too often derailed. The potential I have as a child of God, blessed by God with special gifts and grace, is too often unrealized because it is overshadowed by the power of darkness. I'm thinking of the voice whose refrain resides within so many saying something like, "You're not worthy. Who are you kidding?! You can't do this. Beloved of God?! Hah! Don't even bother." That devil's voice deceives and enslaves us until the light of God's grace shines upon it and we see it as false and self-destructive. When I can recognize the devil, I can ask Jesus - quite literally, in prayer - to come to my assistance: "Jesus, I need your help, your light and your truth. Help me to see this thing that has hold of me; diminish its allure and its power over me. Help me to tell a new story about myself - with you in it."

Dear ones, let the Spirit lead you into the wilderness - out beyond and deep within - wherever the devil may be found. While we must each make the choice for ourselves, we may have good company. A friend of the devil is a friend of mine. I agree with Sam Candler: "The person who has been through the wilderness is someone I trust. The person who has gotten to know his dark side, his weaknesses, his vulnerabilities, his sins: that man is a friend of mine. A person ... friendly with temptation and trial; she is my friend."

We are not going alone. Jesus has passed this way before us. Jesus knows the devil's ways and shall meet us in the wilderness today. And when you pass through the trial, as they did for Jesus long ago, God's angels shall come and wait upon you, emboldening you for the new life that lies ahead. Amen.