

First Sunday in Lent, Year C

A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger

on March 9, 2025

Deuteronomy 26:1-11 / Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16 / Romans 10:8b-13 / Luke 4:1-13

*May my words be acceptable to God;
faithful to the teachings of Christ;
and inspired by the Holy Spirit;
that we may be blessed by the same Triune God.*

*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan
and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness,
where for 40 days He was tempted by the devil.*

Just the other day, I was pulled aside and asked:

*Fr Ian, who is Satan? Surely, if God is all-powerful and God created
Satan,
God could just get rid of Satan.*

Or words to that effect. I was like:

*It wasn't, "How do you make the sign of the Cross?"
or "Why do we baptize infants?"*

Nope! It was "Who is Satan?" And I knew that Satan was front and center in today's Gospel, so I decided to read-up on him. Firstly, some terminology. "Satan" comes directly from the OT Hebrew as a cognate: *śāṭān* (Hebrew: שָׂטָן). In the Septuagint – the Greek translation of the OT – the word used is *diabolos*, which is *devil* in English.

The development of the concept of Satan is interesting, because the concept is not consistent throughout biblical history, and the way we conceive of Satan

today is not anything like the OT Satan. Furthermore, Christianity does not have a unified understanding or view of Satan. To say that Satan is an enigma would be an understatement!

I want to start with where scholars say we are today on the subject of Satan. It is written in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*:

In modern times [Satan] has been largely ignored or discounted in more 'liberal' churches, but he is still the object of strong belief and fearful attention in many Christian denominations. He is accepted not only as the chief spiritual opponent of God, determined to procure the damnation of as many human souls as he can, but also as one who torments men and women by 'possessing' their bodies.

To my questioner's point, when you hear in Deuteronomy:

The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

it would be understandable to think that God could very easily vanquish this foe. But that's not who or what Satan was in the OT. Satan wasn't even a proper noun in the OT except for one instance in 1 Chronicles 21:

Satan stood up against Israel, and incited David to count the people of Israel.

In the Hebrew, Satan means something like *accuser* or *slanderer*. The problem with that is that those two words don't mean the same thing. So, when you come across the word in the OT, you have to pay attention to the context: *is the satan accusing or slandering?* And then there are terrestrial satans and celestial satans. The first reference to a terrestrial or human satan is actually David! In this

context, David is the *adversary* of The Philistines. A couple of other terrestrial satans are *adversaries* and one is an *accuser*.

The celestial satans are non-humans. The entity in Numbers 22 is not actually hostile to YHWH and is actually an agent of God. I was enlightened by this research about the satan in Job. If you remember, in Job 1, Satan and YHWH have a conversation about Job. And if you look at the text with the understanding that *satan* can be translated as *accuser* or *slanderer*, the exchange makes a lot more sense:

The Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.' Then Satan answered the Lord, 'Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.' The Lord said to Satan, 'Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!' So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.

It's much clearer that the Satan figure is *not* an adversary of God, *not* an anti-God or a fallen angel, but an *accuser* or *slanderer* who tests Job in the sight of God.

Overall, the OT *satan* seems to be associated with sin, rather than a being battling YHWH for human souls. As Israeli philosopher and Biblical scholar Yehezkel Kaufmann wrote in *The Religion of Israel: from its beginnings to the Babylonian exile*:

Biblical religion was unable to reconcile itself with the idea that there was a power in the universe that defied the authority of God and that could serve as an antigod, the symbol and source of evil. Hence, it

*strove to transfer evil from the metaphysical realm to the moral realm, to the realm of sin.*¹

What came next is a bit more interesting, and that's the intertestamental period, the writings in the 400yrs between the OT and the NT, including the Apocrypha and what are referred to as the pseud-epigraphical works. *That's* when Satan became Satan! Satan is presented as an evil spirit who is the antithesis of, and warring against God. Satan's origins are mysterious in these writings, and he has a level of power to be feared.

This 400-year period was notably after the Babylonian Exile where Jewish theologians and everyday people got a heavy dose of the dualistic religious systems of Babylonia and Persia. But in the unique monotheism of Judaism, Satan remained a non-god, a 'fallen' creature. The fall of Satan is described in 2 Enoch. It was during this time that theology shifted from a world created by God and for God to a world that is fought over between good and evil.

So, now we get the NT, and Satan is a fully developed enemy of God and all that is good, and that understanding of Satan gets stronger and stronger as you work your way through the NT. Satan is mentioned by name 35 times, 10 of which are in Paul's Letters to the Corinthians! And *the devil* is mentioned 32 times.

Today, as we start the Season of Lent, we hear that Jesus was tempted by the devil. In Matthew, it's also the devil, and in Mark it's Satan with a capital 'S'. I suppose the other most notable references to Satan in the Gospel are when Jesus tells Peter, "*Get behind me Satan*" after Peter rebukes Jesus for foretelling His Death and Resurrection, and then when the Gospellers say that Satan entered Judas as he received the bread from Jesus at the Last Supper.

So, what are we to take away from today's Gospel to help our faith flourish and our relationship with Jesus deepen? Jesus said that Satan's tyranny will soon

¹ https://archive.org/stream/443904288-the-religion-of-israel-from-its-beginnings-to-the-babylonian-exile/443904288-The-Religion-of-Israel-From-Its-Beginnings-to-the-Babylonian-Exile_djvu.txt

come to an end (John 12.31: *the ruler of this world will be driven out*). Jesus' Resurrection was supposed to vanquish Satan (Hebrews 2). But in Revelation, Satan is still around, and the writer predicts that the Archangel Michael will bring down Satan. As one commentary writes the contradictions in the NT around Satan:

Why does Satan persist?

The problem remains that, despite this victory, the battle goes on.

Defeated he may be, put out of action apparently not.

Now that I'm certain that I have an FBI flag on my internet searches...what do we do with Satan in this story? Do we be the liberal church that largely ignores Satan? On the surface:

Scripture doesn't really tell us where Satan came from.

Jesus' Death didn't result in Satan's fall, and John's Revelation is about the *future* vanquishing of Satan, not an event the past.

There is nothing about Satan's origins or his future.

In just 400 or 500yrs, Satan goes from being an *accuser* or *slanderer* to being the ruler of the underworld. No other creature or being in scripture has even a remotely similar career path!

But if Satan doesn't exist, what is Jesus saving us from? Perhaps we're pointing to the wrong source of evil.

As *accuser* in the OT sense, Satan might not be that bad. During our Lenten self-reflection, perhaps we could use an *accuser* who places a mirror in front of us so we can see not only the pitfalls that we create for others, but also the pitfalls we make for ourselves. Like Job, we would have to either defend what the *accuser* drew out of us, or change for the better, repent.

As *slanderer* in the OT sense, Satan might force us to see how others see us, who only see our bad qualities. Why are there those who don't like us? I doubt any of

you are people who *need* everyone to like you. But even the most self-confident person, the friendliest person, the most helpful person has people who don't like them. A *slanderer* might make us think twice about what makes them say such lies, because behind every lie is some truth.

As *tempter* in the sense of today's Gospel, Satan might help us reflect on our motivations and our definitions of success. Why do we do what we do?

What stones do we turn to bread and why? Is it a metaphor for peddling something as shiny and valuable that is actually dull and useless. All that glitters is not gold. Or is it a metaphor for putting in more effort than the outcome is actually worth?

What is our price point for power and authority? Who have we stepped on or are willing to step on to get where we want to go? *Am I* really the most qualified, or was I just the most ambitious? Whom did I leave behind?

To whom am I proving myself by throwing myself down, either as an act of faux martyrdom or as an act of hyperbolic bravado? Why do I need to prove myself to anyone? Is the faux martyrdom or hyperbolic bravado simply insecurity?

I want to be clear that I'm not advocating for any type of self-reflection involved an accuser, slanderer or tempter that would have a negative effect on mental wellness. I do think that is important for me to say. What I didn't cover today was the role of Satan in the Healings of Jesus and the mental illness that some scholars and preachers attach to that. Spiritual abuse as a contributor to mental illness is real. And I want to be clear that I am speaking of self-reflection within mental wellness.

Accuser, slanderer and *tempter* can be mechanisms of self-reflection as we have seen in the OT. There is a tried-and-true method that sort of brings *accuser, slanderer, tempter* as the mirror holder into a well-known model of self-reflection. The model includes:

1. Admitting powerlessness over flaws.

2. Knowing that there is a Power greater than oneself.
3. Turning one's will and our lives over to God.
4. Making a searching and fearless moral inventory of oneself.
5. Admitting to God, to ourselves, and to others of our wrongs.
6. Being open to God removing defects of character.
7. Asking God to remove shortcomings.
8. Making a list of all harmed by one's actions, and being willing to make amends.
9. Making those amends.
10. Continuing to take personal inventory.
11. Improving one's contact with God.
12. All of which leads to a spiritual awakening.

This is a summary of the 12 Steps of AA and other recovery programs. These 12 Steps are what the *accusers, slanderers* and *tempters* have been trying to lead us to all along. But as anyone in a recovery program knows, you have to get there yourself. And that is what Lenten discipline has always been about! Self-Reflection and Turning ... To Repent means To Turn.

Maybe Satan isn't the Lord of all Evil. Maybe Satan is the impetus to the real self-reflection that results in true amendment of life – to all those behaviors for which we asked God for mercy in the *Litany of Penitence* on Ash Wednesday, which you can find on p18 of the grey service booklet.

We have built this massive image around Satan that probably – at least in popular media – surpasses the image of Jesus. But maybe Satan is precisely what we find in today's Gospel: the voice that tests who we truly are so that our responses may be seen by God. But if we are wise, our responses will be seen by *us*, and we can turn where we need to turn and *call on the name of the Lord and be saved*.