

Does the Devil make us do it?

A sermon on the Temptations of Christ (Matthew 4: 1-11) by Nathan Nettleton, 26 February 2023

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Message

Whether or not you can accept the idea of a personal devil, there are forces of evil in the world that are bigger and more powerful than our own inner flaws, but conscious and united in Christ, we are stronger still.

Sermon

One of the things that I have found confusing over the course of my journey of faith is that there are beliefs that I thought I had rejected, only to find myself starting to believe in them again; things that I thought could be rationally explained away as mythological projections from long gone ages of superstition and primitive thinking. Things like angels and the devil.

I've long been wary of simplistic spiritualised explanations for things that can be more naturally explained. Phrases like "The devil made me do it," have always brought skepticism rising up in me, derision even. I've seen it as a cop-out by people who don't have the guts to take responsibility for their own actions.

In my previous job, decades ago, I used to work with a lot of people with serious and often out-of-control mental illnesses, and one of the common symptoms was religious delusions. I was constantly being told that the devil tripped someone up in the street, or a demon made someone lose ten dollars, or Satan knocked a coffee cup out of someone's hand. This sort of stuff made me more and more convinced that the devil was nothing but a psycho-social projection for people who habitually look for someone else to blame.

And even if he wasn't, the devil, unlike God, cannot be in all places at once and I was pretty sure that wandering around my neighbourhood tripping over harmless people was not high on the devil's list of strategies for undermining the work of God.

But over the years I have increasingly found myself believing in the existence of the devil again. I'm not saying I believe that there is a little red man with a forked tail and horns – in fact the Bible never describes him that way anyway. I'm not even sure whether I really believe that there is one being, one individual who is called the Devil or the Satan, but I am finding it increasingly easy and even helpful to imagine it that way.

The reason is that I am more and more convinced that there are powers of evil that are not just the sum of our own human flaws, prides and selfishness. They are not just the results of bad toilet training, absent fathers and childhood trauma. Not that those things aren't bad enough – the damage done in childhood can continue to have destructive and tragic consequences right the way through a lifetime. But the further I go on my journey the more I see things in myself, in the church and on the national or global stage that just do not seem to be explainable in terms of simple consequences of past hurts.

Some things seem to defy comprehension unless there are forces of cosmic evil that are bigger and stronger and far more systematically organised than our assorted human weaknesses could ever be. And I am increasingly convinced that to try to explain them in simple psycho-social terms actually leaves us more vulnerable to them than we are if we are able to give them a name, an identity, as a focus for our opposition and resistance.

Jon Leveson raises the question of whether Dietrich Bonhoeffer would have been half as clear and courageous in his resistance to the Nazis if he had believed Hitler and his followers to be just the unknowing victims of inner psychological traumas. No, Bonhoeffer saw evil as having a face, having a name, and therefore being something that could be unmasked, denounced and resisted. So perhaps belief in the devil may actually inspire deeds of heroic good, and not just be a way to cop out of responsibility.

You see, one of the ways that evil hides itself so effectively is by never having a face or a name. You can see this whenever there is a campaign about some clear evil in the world of business or politics. We might be campaigning against the release of toxins into the river, or against the continuing obscenity of deaths in custody, or against the mounting pressure on people to work longer and longer hours unpaid and neglect their families. And what is the biggest obstacle to any such campaign?? Every time it is the same thing – inability to identify where the buck stops, who is responsible. The further you chase the lines of responsibility the more they just get blurry and indistinct and impersonal. Everyone and everything and every decision seems to be a helpless victim of market forces, or global trends or economic imperatives. You try to find where the buck stops, but it not only doesn't stop, it vanishes in the haze.

Now I'm not suggesting for a moment that saying the buck stops with the Satan is going to make one iota of difference in such situations, although being able to name a situation as demonic can have an impact. What I am saying is that when evil wants to get its own way, it usually becomes nameless and faceless, and in doing so it disarms those who would oppose it because they have nowhere to aim. And I am increasingly convinced that people like me who have been so intellectually clever and rationalist in our explanations for everything have actually played right into the devil's hands by allowing him to conceal himself behind our theories of primitive myth and superstition and psychological projection.

This is true whether you are trying to fight the forces of racism and genocidal politics, or whether you are trying to dislodge blockages in your own prayer life.

Let me illustrate from my own experience. Back when I first began committing myself to a regular discipline of daily prayer, I noticed some strange reactions within myself. First there was just the resistance I have always had to any form of discipline, but I managed, for the first time in my life to persevere beyond that, to break through that barrier. When I got beyond that all sorts of things began to go haywire in my life, most of them things I would still see primarily in terms of my own psychological baggage. My inner shit was coming to the surface. But then as I began to cope with that some things began to happen that felt much more like there were conscious spiritual forces involved seeking to derail the train before my journey went too far.

I started finding appetites growing for things that pulled me in the opposite direction. For example, I started feeling a pull towards sleazy pornography that I hadn't really experienced since I was a hormone infested nineteen year old. There didn't seem to be anything else going on in my life at the time to suggest that it was simply drawing on unresolved issues in my psyche or my relationships. Rather it was as though the opposition had conceded that I was going to pray so the next best strategy was to try to counter-balance the impact of that. Meet an increase in prayer with an increase in sleaze and at the end of the day the balance is

roughly the same as it always was. Back then, although the internet was quite new, porn was suddenly far more accessible than it had been when I was nineteen.

In the face of a struggle like that, it can make all the difference in the world whether you see the temptations as a manifestation of evil or simply a quirky flaw of your own psychology. If I see it as simply a little maladjustment due to a rejection in early puberty or something, then it is no big deal. I can deal with it tomorrow, or in six months, or just learn to live with it. We're all broken, all saved by grace alone. We all have our faults and foibles.

But if I recognise that this is actually a stage in a concerted, organised and systematic campaign to subvert the work of Christ in and through me, then the situation is very different. The stakes are much higher. It makes a real difference whether I confront this head on now or just adapt to it and don't worry about it too much.

Please don't take from my illustration the idea that all sinful temptation is about sex. It's not, but along with money, and power it is one of the big three. Sex is the easiest to illustrate but money and power probably shipwreck more Christian lives. In every church there are plenty of people who at some stage in their journey have faced some crisis questions in how they will handle money, sex or power in their lives, and partly because they have failed to see it in the context of a demonic strategy to derail their discipleship, they have made some significant compromise and just adapted to living with an area of their life running on different values to the rest.

It is the beginning of fragmentation, of disintegration. It is no accident that the words integration and integrity are almost the same.

One fatal compromise that you refuse to revisit, to reevaluate: if the devil can get you once and then persuade you to ignore the resulting wound, the infection will slowly kill you and he'll never have to worry about you again.

If you never feel attacked by the forces of evil it is probably because you never cause him any trouble so why should he bother. If you prefer to think that it is because you are of such high spiritual calibre, then you need to explain today's gospel reading for us. Because Jesus experienced the attacks of the devil very clearly.

It is interesting to note that of the big three, money, sex and power, it is predominantly power that the devil tries to get at Jesus with. This is no surprise because it is undoubtedly the most subtle and the most potent of the three. And according to the other version of this story in Luke's gospel, the Satan does not concede defeat at the end, he just departs from Jesus until an opportune time. He's just biding his time, lying in wait.

Whether it is helpful to you to think of evil forces as being personified in an individual, the Satan, or just as dark nebulous forces, what the gospel story makes clear is that the cosmic resistance to Jesus was organised, subtle, and genuinely threatening. Capable even of appearing as an angel of light quoting scripture.

But before you lose hope in the face of all this, let me point out what is on our side. Firstly the devil can't make you do anything. I still believe that anyone who says "the devil made me do it" is copping out. The devil can tempt you, lure you, seek to distract you, try to confuse you,

all sorts of things. But the devil can't make you do anything. Whatever the devil does, you still have sole choice and control over your own actions.

Secondly we are made in the image of God, and that includes having a natural instinct for goodness and being able to tell the difference. And not only are we God's image bearers, we are redeemed image bearers who in our relationship with the Spirit of God have available to us more than enough wisdom, courage and strength to discern and resist whatever the devil can throw at us.

Thirdly we do not usually have to face evil alone the way Jesus did. We are called together into a community of redeemed people and so we can pool both our wisdom and our strength, and as a community be much more capable of discerning and overcoming the threats to our wellbeing.

And finally we know we are on the winning side. We know that in Jesus Christ the powers of evil are defeated and that all that is left is a rear guard guerrilla action yet to be fully mopped up. And in that knowledge, even when the opposition is at its fiercest, we know that if we can just hang on and hold our ground, that will be enough, because they're running out of resources.

This season of Lent teaches us a lot about just hanging on, about gritting our teeth and resisting the forces of evil. But paradoxically one of the resources we have to sustain us in that is the spirit of celebration – celebrating the victory that we know is won but which we so far experience only in part. That's why we come each week to the Lord's Table, to celebrate what has been accomplished, and to be sustained for the remaining struggle until all things are brought to fulfilment.