



## Friend of the Devil

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin  
The First Sunday in Lent, February 10, 2008*

*Matthew 4:1-11:*

After Jesus was baptized, he was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

With thanks to Sam Candler, Dean of St. Phillip's Cathedral in Atlanta, I'd like to draw on an unlikely source to interpret our Gospel reading this morning\*. I'd like to draw upon a favorite band of mine 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—where he was tempted!

Matthew's Gospel relates Jesus' encounter with the devil in a tightly compressed exchange: the devil tempted him, and Jesus responded; the devil tempted him a second and third time, followed each time by Jesus' response. It's not clear, however, whether the devil showed up on the fortieth day or if he was there with Jesus all the while.

Forty days is a long, long, long time to be alone—alone in the wild with yourself, your thoughts and fantasies and fears. Matthew 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; picture canyons of the American Southwest, without cactus or trees or anything alive at all 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.

---

Copyright © 2008, The Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin. Recent sermons delivered by the clergy of St. Peter's Church, 313 Pine Street, Philadelphia, PA, are available in church on the following Sunday, on the Web at [www.stpetersphila.org](http://www.stpetersphila.org) or by calling the parish office (215-925-5968).

\*The Very Rev. Samuel G. Candler offered a sermon online on this text, which provided me several of the images and themes I have explored here.

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 all 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. The gist of that second temptation is 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.

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.

Let's move this conversation from the desert to our own lives. Do 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 people like this and learned a few of their wily ways and know—if not how to defeat—at least how to manage them, contain them. The devil we don't know has the capacity and the power to scare us, surprise us, catch us off guard at a vulnerable moment, or undermine us undetected.

I'll explore three instances of this. This nation was caught completely unaware on September 11, 2001 when those planes crashed into our lives. Do you recall the language of our response? We spoke of Osama bin Laden as the devil. And we retaliated. We were vulnerable and scared, and we attacked. Did we know what we were getting ourselves into? (But) I remember reading a compelling article in the *New York Times Magazine*. Author Paul Berman had done much research into the theological teachings that informed bin Laden and the leaders of Al Qaeda; it was a summary of that particular strand of Islamic fundamentalism. I don't recall whether or not we had already gone into Afghanistan, and I don't believe Berman was labeling bin Laden as the devil, (I certainly am not!) but he was advocating that we invest necessary time and energy into learning the theology and thinking that went into the initial assault. He was not in any way suggesting that bin Laden and his crew were a bunch of nice fellows—far from it. He was suggesting that in order to defeat the enemy—or at least manage, contain and co-habit the earth with these others—we need to know what makes them tick and how they see us. We need to know what motivates and animates them, what fuels their passion

A different situation—another familiar little quote, this one from the cartoon strip Pogo: “We have met the enemy and he is us.” Appropriately enough, that saying gained widespread popularity when it was used as a poster for Earth Day in 1970. Forty years ago we knew that it was our own behavior that was desecrating and destroying God's precious creation, this fragile earth, our island home. When it comes to stewardship of the earth, we have met the enemy . . . I found *An Inconvenient Truth*—Al Gore's film about climate change—so very compelling, not because of the facts and figures, but because of the way Mr. Gore teased out our resistance to the knowledge that has been right in front of us. Why—What is it—he wonders—that keeps us from seeing, that prevents us from taking action?

To use theological language that might make both Mr. Gore and the Nobel Prize committee uncomfortable, let's ask what blind acquiescence to the tempter's lure fuels our own self-destruction and demise. Mr. Gore and many others have contributed mightily to unmasking the sin against creation that we have been perpetuating, even increasing, over many, many years. We have continued in this sinful behavior because we manage to keep ourselves from seeing it. There is 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. The question, the challenge is to see it as such, for only then can we seek the help we need, the grace from God, to turn from our ways with the power to respond.

It has been my intent to speak of the works of the devil on an international and a global scale, because the problem of sin and the season of Lent are not occasions merely to pick at little personal foibles in the interest of self-improvement, fascinating as most of us find that to be. I commend to you the Lenten discipline being called for by the Bishops of London and Liverpool: a carbon fast, forty days finding forty ways to reduce our carbon footprint. (You can read about it online at [Tearfund.org](http://Tearfund.org)).

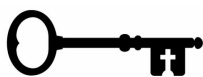
But my words would be incomplete if I did not ask you now to look within, for this is the terrain in which the devil holds great sway, particularly when the devil's presence lies undetected. I won't presume to speak for you, but I know that my own good intentions and purity of heart are too often derailed by malignant or misguided needs. 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 within. Pride, greed, self-doubt, envy and all the rest—these play havoc in our interior life. Within each one of us, the battle in the desert between Jesus and the devil is being played out daily. Carl Jung and his students call us to explore the darker, scarier, shadow aspects of our selves. Get to know your dark side—the unidentified, unexamined urges within—so they can't jump up and undo you.

I think, for instance, of the voice whose refrain resides within so many saying something like, "You can't do it. You're not good enough. You're not worthy. Who are you kidding?! Don't even bother." That devil's voice chains 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."

Friend of the devil is a friend of mine. I agree with Dean 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." Go out beyond: to the streets, the nation, the planet, and go within yourself as well; seek out the devil where e'er the devil may be found.

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



Open hearts. Open minds.