

## Basic Christianity

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the first Sunday in Lent, March 1, 1998. Scripture Lessons: Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

The first event recorded in the life of Jesus after his baptism is his temptation in the wilderness by the Devil. Christ's temptation was extremely meaningful to early Christians. We know that because all four Gospels tell us the temptation story. It was very important for the early Christians, who themselves faced dreadful daily temptations, to remember that Jesus was tempted by the Devil and overcame the Devil for their sake. Christ's temptation was basic to their understanding of the Christian faith.

For many people, the mention of the Devil tells them that this story is a myth. Many American main line theologians have problems believing in a devil. Americans are optimists. Americans have never really taken sin and evil very seriously. Even fundamentalists, who do believe in a Devil, tend to trivialize sin and evil as well as the Devil. Some rationalist theologians tell us that reasonable modern men and women can't believe, at the same time, in electricity and the Devil. Belief in the Devil has no place in an age of reason. But rationalist theologians ignore the irrational. They don't know what to do with anything that's not reasonable. And evil is not rational. Evil defies reason. Evil makes no sense. It can't be explained. The Bible speaks of the mystery of evil. Fred Buechner, a Presbyterian minister, who is definitely not a rationalist theologian writes, "To take the Devil seriously is to take seriously the fact that the total evil in the world is greater than the sum of all its parts. Likewise the total evil in yourself. The murderer who says, 'I couldn't help it' isn't necessarily just kidding."

Many of you will remember an event that took place at the Altamont Rock Festival a few months after Woodstock. The Rolling Stones gave a free concert. In that summer of love, idealism and optimism many people didn't feel the need of security guards. As a gesture of good will the Hell's Angels were asked to keep order. <sup>In the middle</sup> ~~Near the end~~ of the concert the Rolling Stones stepped to the microphone and began to sing...

Please allow me to introduce myself  
I'm a man of wealth and taste  
I've been around for a long, long year  
Stole many a man's soul and faith  
And I was 'round when Jesus Christ  
Had His moment of doubt and pain  
Made damn sure that Pilate  
Washed his hands and sealed His fate  
Pleased to meet you, hope you guess my name  
But what's puzzling you is the nature of my game

As they sang, bad LSD was creating outbreaks of irrational violence throughout the crowd. Worst of all, some Hell's Angels knifed a black teenager to death right in front of the stage while the Stones were performing. Chaos broke out. Mick Jagger turned to his band and said, "Why is it that every time we sing that song something strange happens." He turned to the audience and tried to restore order. "Why are we fighting? Why are we fighting? We don't want to fight. Come on." Confronted with the irrationalism of the violence Mick Jagger was powerless. Reason was powerless. It was a terrifying night. On the Stones next tour of the United States Jagger wore a large crucifix around his neck.

Lent is the season where we practice the primary task of "staying alive" in our Christian wilderness journey. The Devil wants to rob us of eternal life. Belief in the Devil helps me remember that "our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the... spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Belief in the Devil reminds me that evil is real and powerful. Evil is personal. Evil often disguises itself in respectability. Evil is not just the sum total of individual bad deeds. Evil is a power which gets a grip on human life and society. And the Christian life is a kind of warfare. There is a mystery to both good and evil. We are often tempted to choose evil because it doesn't appear to be bad. And we often refrain from doing good because we don't recognize it as good.

Diogenes Allen writes that "Evil often seems to glitter, and it attracts. It is not repulsive; frequently, it is fascinating. One of the names for the devil is Lucifer, based on the Latin word for light. He is portrayed in much ancient mythology as shining. This suggests that evil has the paradoxical quality of being in fact hideous yet appearing attractive. Thus it has the power to deceive us."

The Devil is smart enough not to tempt us to be Satanists. His temptations are far more subtle. But Jesus was victorious over his temptations. "One does not live by bread alone." We all know we need food but we also know that we can't live by bread alone. Knowing that, however, often doesn't seem to do much good. The demands placed upon us to buy food and pay the bills keep threaten to rob us of spiritual life. "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." We know that worship must be an absolute priority to stay alive spiritually. And yet a thousand things push God out of our lives. "Don't put God to the test." Perhaps the greatest temptation of all is the religious temptation; the temptation to prove to ourselves that God exists or to prove to ourselves that we have faith.

Most of us have been baptized and have professed our faith in Jesus Christ. But we've stopped there. We've made little progress because we don't see that the Christian life requires spiritual warfare. We're saved by grace through faith, but God calls us to fight the good fight against sin and evil and the Devil. Christ calls us to follow him through baptism into spiritual warfare. He calls us to struggle and overcome the Devil in the power of the Spirit.

We need spiritual weapons. Reason, by itself, as valuable as reason is - won't help us. We need spiritual food. We come to the Lord's Table to be strengthened for that struggle with spiritual food. We come trusting in God's grace, love and mercy in Jesus Christ. We come to remind ourselves that our struggle is not against flesh and blood. We come as defeated sinners destined in Christ to be victorious.

Almighty God,  
your Son fasted forty days in the wilderness,  
and was tempted as we are but did not sin.  
Give us grace to direct our lives  
in obedience to your Spirit,  
that as you know our weakness,  
so we may know your power to save;  
through Jesus Christ our Redeemer,  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever. Amen.