

Dealing with the Devil: Part 2

[Matthew 4:1-11](#)

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In my senior year of college, a certain book became a huge source of amusement for my friend Rachel and me. Rachel stumbled across the book, discarded on a bench in the school chapel. I still wonder how it got there in the first place: had someone left it as a joke, or was it a sincere attempt to evangelize students at Wellesley College?

The book was *How to Satan-Proof Your Home*, by Marilyn Hickey. The cover featured a black silhouette of Satan, with horns and pitchfork, drawn in a sneaky, creeping pose, with a big red line through him. *No Satan allowed here.*

My friend and I thought it was so funny, and we riffed on it endlessly, deciding that you could interpret *How To Satan-Proof Your Home* two ways:

In one interpretation, Satan is like vermin, crawling around in your walls and scampering across your kitchen floor. We enjoyed imagining mousetraps and rat poison, but for *Satan*, not mice. What would you do if you actually captured Satan? Did you humanely release him back into the wild?

And in the other interpretation, Satan-proofing was like baby-proofing: something you did to make your home safer and more welcoming for Satan, so that he wouldn't slip or start a fire or electrocute himself. God forbid anything happen to little Satan!

We got a lot of mileage out of this. The actual content of the book turned out to be less literal than we'd hoped. It wasn't practical housekeeping tips and tricks and—we'd hoped—rituals. It was more about prayer and reading the Bible and living what that author understood to be a "Godly" life.

But the book's sensational cover has stuck with me, as has the premise of the book: the idea that (a) evil can be personified and (b) if we do the right thing, evil can be kept out of our homes, out our families, and out our lives,

It's no mystery where these ideas about Satan and about Evil come from, at least in part. They come from this character of Satan found in so many of our sacred texts and stories. Last week, I discussed one version of Satan, the one found in The Book of Job. In that story, Satan is not exactly the bad guy, not the way we usually think of him. He's more a tool, a literary device that exists to explain a burning existential question: how can an all-powerful God allow terrible things to happen, even to good people.

But this version of Satan in the Book of Job is but *one* example found in our tradition. And our tradition is complicated.

Jewish texts like the Book of Job tend to view Satan as a henchman of God, always under God's ultimate control. But early followers of Jesus, as they are represented by the Gospel writers, glommed onto that character and took him to a new level, re-envisioning Satan as God's rival, as demonic, as synonymous with evil. The Gospel writers saw Satan as one side in a cosmic battle between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Darkness.

Why would early Christians do this? Well, because they were telling a new story built around a new hero: Jesus Christ. And it's a basic principle of storytelling that heroes need villains. Heroes aren't heroes unless there's a challenge to overcome, an enemy to defeat.

We see that paradigm so vividly in today's reading: Jesus' temptation in the desert. It's a reimagining of the drama found in the Book of Job, with the bad guy attempting to sabotage the good guy. But instead of torturing the good guy, as Satan did to Job, Satan takes a different tactic here. He tries to *manipulate* Jesus. He offers Jesus worldly power and pleasures. He tempts Jesus to use his divine power for personal gain. And all Jesus has to do is to renounce God and worship Satan.

Of course, Jesus isn't fooled. That's the point of the story: Jesus, who is God incarnate, withstands the devil, who is evil incarnate. Moral of the story: God is more powerful.

So what are we, as followers of Jesus, to think, to do? Well, from the beginning, Christians have sensed that we're supposed to model our behavior on Jesus, to follow his lead as illustrated in this story. Like Jesus, we're called to place our faith not in wealth or success or human power, but in God. And to do this, we must resist the temptations of greed and ownership and stick with our deepest values even under pressure. We must place God, not ourselves, at the center of our universe.

Now, I think this is very good advice. I think our world would look very different right now if more of us were able to do that.

But like so many things biblical, this story, this characterization of Satan as the enemy of all that is good—it has, over the centuries, taken on a life of its own, a life far beyond the imaginings of its first audience. For some background on this, I turned to the work of religious scholar Elaine Pagels. She's *most* famous for her book on the Gnostic Gospels, which are the stories of Jesus excluded from the church canon, which means they are stories that never were included in the Bibles in our pews. But Elaine Pagels has *another* great work: it's called *The Origin of Satan: How Christians Demonized Jews, Pagans, and Heretics*.

In that work, Pagels shows us that early Christians had a lot of what she calls “intimate enemies.” By this she means that the early Christians were actually various factions of Jews trying to figure out who they were in relation to this Jesus, and who they weren’t. The struggle for religious identity and allegiance produced, in some early church leaders, a highly dualistic way of seeing the world: good versus evil, light versus dark, right versus wrong.

Pagels writes, “[Visions of Satan] have served, among other things, to confirm for Christians their own identification with God and to demonize their opponents—first, other Jews [who did not follow Jesus, and] then pagans, and later, dissident Christians, called heretics.”

Indeed, when you look at the history of the Christian church, one of its most effective tools against dissent has been to associate the “other” party with Satan. That is, “true” Christians claiming that other, “false” Christians worship Satan, or are the spawn of Satan, or are influenced by Satan.

The institutional Church has widely wielded this “othering” power against a long and shameful list of groups: Jews; Muslims; women and children; indigenous people and people of color; LGBTQ people; and people with mental illness and different abilities. Catholics have done it to Protestants and Protestants have done it to Catholics. Christian rhetoric

about Satan has persisted well into the modern age, most obviously among the most radically fundamentalist of groups.

But it would be dishonest to pretend that demonizing is the work of one political or religious group. You don't need me to tell you that extreme division and polarization has been the name of the game lately. In this kind of climate, it's really easy—downright tempting—to demonize any group of people we find threatening or confusing or frustrating. And things get very scary, very quickly, when someone draws a gun, whether it's among lawmakers playing baseball or at a routine traffic stop outside of St. Paul.

Speaking of that second scenario: I've watched all the available footage of the Philando Castile shooting, multiple times. And for the life of me, I can't understand why Philando is dead. I cannot see why Officer Yanez shot into that car with a child in the backseat, unless something about Philando Castile's person—not his actions, but simply his appearance—frightened Officer Yanez so profoundly that he lost all sense of scale and self-control.

Have you ever been on either side of that equation? Demonized, or demonizer? It's a terrible place to be. I cannot imagine that God intended for us to interact this way.

I don't have easy answers here. But I do think the Church has a particular calling at this moment. I think we are called to face the way that our history has contributed to the extremism of American culture.

And I believe we are called to resist the urge to demonize. To resist it with all our hearts and minds and souls.

Now, I don't think this means that we must not criticize institutions or policies or individual actions that we find to be unjust. On the contrary, as Christ stood up to power for the sake of the hungry, the outcast, and the stranger, *so must we*.

But we need to be really, really careful not to demonize others as we do it. We need to stay grounded in our common humanity, even when we disagree, even when we are offended and outraged and hurt.

I'll give you an example. I've walked past those religious picketers in Bridge Square many times. They'll be holding up signs condemning homosexuality and abortion—two issues that define my life. I go through all these different emotions: fear, shame, anger.

It is so tempting to do to them what they are doing to me. To demonize them. To dehumanize them. And, like Jesus in the desert, I find I'm faced with a choice, an internal choice, a spiritual choice. How do I want to look at these people?

And I remind myself, I don't have to like them. I don't have to love them, not in the traditional sense. I have to love them only in the most basic human sense. That is, I have to recognize that they, like me, are creatures of God, created in the image of God. They are not cartoon devils that I can keep out my house and out of my life. On the contrary, these picketers are all-too-human, and we are driven by the same fundamental needs.

We *all* want to feel safe. We *all* want to belong. We *all* want to know, in our bones, that we're doing the right thing.

Now, don't get me wrong: I remain strong, in my conviction, that these folks have a warped and unhealthy perspective, and that I'm called to tell a different story than theirs, a story about the God of love and mercy and inclusion.

But if and when I allow myself to demonize these folks, to think of them as less-than-human, then I have forgotten the larger story of our common needs that we share.

Again, this isn't easy stuff. It's a spiritual practice, even a physical practice, to choose love when choosing another way would be so much easier. And you know, sometimes we *will* make the wrong choice. We'll make a snide remark or perpetuate a stereotype or simply fail to recognize our own biases.

But fortunately, we're not alone in the desert. We're the Body of Christ, and we can keep each other honest, and hold each other accountable, and teach and challenge and forgive one another. And together, I predict we can last forty days and beyond, choosing love over and over *and over* again.

May it be so.

Amen.