

Tempted to Less  
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Luke 4:1-13

Let me start by saying that scriptures which include the devil, satan, or demons are just . . . weird.

The first image that comes to my mind when I hear those words is the red guy with horns, a tail, and a pitchfork.

Thinking about that led me down a really weird rabbit hole in writing this sermon. This happens to me sometimes.

A question comes to mind or an idea catches my imagination, and I spend 30 minutes researching something that then has no place in the sermon.

This week it was images of the devil or Satan and the question of how they have changed over time.

It was actually fascinating to see how, centuries ago, the devil was depicted as a goat, a monster, or a hybrid of some kind. It seemed to me (in the expertise I gained in 30 minutes on google) that depictions of the devil generally became more human over time.

Maybe that's because we stopped believing in monsters, or maybe because we started recognizing that the real monsters are all too human.

But (my weird sermon-prep rabbit hole aside) scriptures that include this figure are simultaneously easy and difficult to deal with.

They are easy to dismiss because we don't tend to believe in the devil or Satan. At the same time, they're hard to deal with because they do raise questions about the presence of evil in the world.

The origin and presence of evil are way beyond the scope of this sermon, but I did come across something intriguing in my language study.

The word translated here as devil is connected to the Greek words *diabolos* and *diaballo*, which means slanderous, accusing falsely, or to throw accusations.<sup>1</sup>

So the devil could be described as one who throws false accusations. You may hear in these words their connection to our modern English word

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<sup>1</sup> { [HYPERLINK "about:blank"](#) } and { [HYPERLINK "about:blank"](#) }

diabolical, or diabolic.

Some scholars now refer to the devil as  
“the Diabolic One.”<sup>2</sup>

Regardless of whether we believe in the existence of such a creature,  
the storyteller does;  
so we will look at the text as we would any piece of literature.  
But first let’s talk about our own temptations.

You’re probably familiar with a psychological experiment  
about delayed gratification, referred to as the marshmallow test.  
It has been repeated in many places, and you can watch videos of several.  
Typically a child is placed in a room by themselves, and seated at a table.  
In front of them is placed a marshmallow.  
The children are told that they can eat the marshmallow if they want,  
but if they don’t eat it right away, and wait until the instructor comes back,  
they will be given a second marshmallow.

Then a hidden camera records their actions.

In the videos I’ve seen, the children use a variety of methods to resist temptation.  
Some covered their eyes—don’t look.  
Others held their hands away—don’t touch.  
Some of them sniffed it, or pretended to eat it.  
One little girl took little nibbles, all around the edges,  
then put it upside down,  
hoping the person in charge wouldn’t notice.

Those who designed the test took away the best options for resisting temptation:  
the ability to “step away from the marshmallow!”

They were told to sit in the chair,  
right in front of the marshmallow in all its ooey-gooey-ness.

But that’s the way it is with temptation, isn’t it?

Sometimes it is all-consuming; you can’t get away from it.

It would be easier if you could.

You might get distracted and find something else more appealing.

You might be stronger at a distance.

You might be just lazy enough not to get off the couch and get the stepstool

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<sup>2</sup> Jeremy L. Williams, { [HYPERLINK "about:blank"](#) }

and move the stuff off the top of the refrigerator  
in order to get to the cabinet where you hid the good chocolate.

But let's say the temptation is to something a little more worrisome than truffles.  
Let's say it's that person at work . . .

The one who thinks you're funny. (Your spouse knows all your jokes.)

The one who says "Nice outfit. Is that new?"

(Your spouse either didn't notice or complained about the cost.)

The one who says, "Have you been working out?"

(Your spouse just complains about you spending more time away.)

The one who drops hints about their unhappy marriage:

"Your spouse is so lucky."

("Lucky" is not the word your spouse would use right now.)

And suddenly you have all that ooey-gooey temptation right in front of you.  
Only, unlike the marshmallow test, if you resist, you're not going to get two!

This is one of the temptations that can change our lives,  
and most often not for the good.

We know other life-wrecking temptations, of course.

Now, for the record, addiction is not as an issue of temptation.

You can't overcome an addiction merely through willpower or self-restraint  
so that falls into a different category altogether.

Still, we know the big temptations,  
and although they can wreck our lives,  
and although they can seem huge at the time,  
they actually in some ways are the easiest  
merely because they are so obvious.

We know we're crossing the line because the lines are clear.

But what about the other temptations that rule our lives?

Perhaps your temptation is performance and pretense that all is well.

If not pretense, then maybe past tense (and the lure of living there).

If not the past, then maybe a future focus sucks you in.

Maybe it's sucking every last drop of sweet revenge that you can't resist.

Maybe you can't resist living by the fist

if not of might than the power of right . . .

being right  
doing right  
withholding rights from those who say you're wrong.

You can be tempted by what's wrong  
or be tempted by what's right but not for you  
or be tempted by what's left when you promised what's first to God.  
You can be tempted to leave  
because it's easier than the work it takes to stay,  
and you can be tempted to stay because it's the devil you know.

Temptations come in many forms and few with horns.  
I can't name them all, though I can claim quite a few.

But what if this story isn't about being tempted **to** something,  
but rather **away** from something?

For Jesus in this story, the real temptations are all about identity.  
Rev. Dr. David Lose puts it this way:

"Notice how each of the temptations seeks to erode and undercut  
Jesus' confidence in his relationship with God  
and therefore undermine Jesus' identity.

Jesus, of course, picks up on this.

Which is why when the devil offers him bread,  
he responds with an affirmation of trust in God.

The next temptation is more transparent,  
offering Jesus the power of the world's leaders  
in return for Jesus' allegiance and worship.  
But again Jesus knows that his allegiance can only be given  
to the one from whom he has received his identity.

Finally, the devil proposes that God is not trustworthy,  
and goads Jesus into testing that relationship. But Jesus refuses.

In each case, the devil seeks to undermine Jesus' confidence  
in both God and himself.

He seeks, that is, to erode Jesus' confidence that he is enough,  
that he is secure, that he is worthy of God's love."<sup>3</sup>

And if the "diabolic one" thinks Jesus can be tempted to believe  
he's not enough, how much more so can we?

In response to each temptation, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy,

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<sup>3</sup> David Lose, { [HYPERLINK "about:blank" }](#) }

the speeches of Moses before the people entered the promised land.  
In other words,  
“In the face of these temptations, Jesus quotes the sacred story of Israel  
in order to assert that he is a part of that story  
and therefore reaffirm his identity as a child of God. . . .  
Which is why I think this passage is really about identity theft.  
And not simply the devil’s failed attempt to steal Jesus’ identity  
but all the attempts to rob us of ours.”<sup>4</sup>

We have all, to one extent or another, been the victim of identity theft.  
I’m not talking about credit cards and social security numbers,  
but our identity as children of God,  
as individuals of infinite worth.

The advertising world tries to tell us we’re not enough:  
we need this product to make us acceptable.

The political climate tells us we’re not secure:  
we need this candidate to make us safe.

The powerful tells us we’re weak:  
we need to be on the pinnacle to prove our power.

And then there are the personal messages:  
those who try to define us by what we are or what we aren’t,  
those who told us we weren’t enough  
those who told us we were too much.

These messages are all diabolical.

They are slander. They are lies.  
They try to tempt us away from who we are.  
They are identity theft.

The most dangerous temptations aren’t about what we do with our bodies.  
They’re about what we don’t do—  
with our minds, when we close them to new understandings,  
with our imaginations, when we close them to possibility,  
with our hearts, when we close them to another.

The most dangerous temptations are those that convince us to be  
less than we are.

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<sup>4</sup> David Lose, { [HYPERLINK "about:blank" }](#) }

An expansive faith tells us to remember that we are dust and stardust.

An expansive faith tells us to focus on God's abundance.

An expansive faith tells us

we don't need to wield power.

We need to offer grace—abundant grace, amazing grace—  
to ourselves and to others.

This is expansive faith. Expansive life.

The tempter, the tester, the diabolic one,

tried to get Jesus to turn stones into bread.

But Jesus knew that bread could be multiplied.

Jesus knew that loaves could abound.

*[He] gives us love to tell, bread to share: God (Immanuel) everywhere!*

*Jesus lives again, earth can breathe again, pass the Word around: loaves abound!*

Come to the table of expansive love.