

Fr. John's Homily for February 26, 2023, the First Sunday of Lent

CHS JMJ

Did I ever tell you about the cartoon I once saw in a religious magazine? God and one of his angels of light are in heaven, looking down on earth. God shakes his head, and says, "maybe that free will thing was not such a hot idea after all." Ok, we giggled, but I trust that God was not that amused at what he saw down here.

Now we don't really know the mind of the cartoonist. Was he speaking from his place in the present and reflecting on the condition of our world, in the here-and-now? Or was he thinking about the very beginning? Maybe he was referring to the scene that we just read from Genesis where Adam and Eve set the course for the future of our world by their free-will choice – the choice to disobey God and listen to a snake. A snake disguised as an angel of light.

OK, let's use our imaginations a bit here and consider the possibility that the cartoonist really had something else in mind. A totally different meaning. And one not so obvious to those of us who first saw that cartoon. Let's presume that the angel was actually a fallen angel. One named Lucifer, which means light bearer, or the Morning Star. We now know him by different names. The devil. Satan. The ancient serpent. The deceiver. The accuser of the brethren. And let's further presume that the words spoken in the cartoon were actually not the words of God, but the words of the fallen angel. And that they were spoken with an air of accusation, and dripping with sarcasm. It might've sounded something like this... "Well, most holy and perfect one, it seems like your gift of free will was not such a hot idea after all."

Do you know we have examples in scripture of God and Satan being in the same place together? Almost as if they were old friends, which they were. In the beginning, before his fall from grace. Remember the story of Job? One day Satan sneaks into God's presence with a bunch of true angels of light, but God sees him and asks him, sort of, "Hey Satan, what you been up to?" The demon replies, "Well, I've been out roaming the earth and patrolling it." He was looking for souls to devour."

And then, in today's Gospel the devil shows up in the wilderness and tempts Jesus. He tries three approaches and none of them work. But, something interesting happened. In his last effort he, took Jesus up a high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the earth, and said, "if you will only fall down and worship me, I will give you all these magnificent lands." The implication here was that the world belongs to the devil. Jesus even referred to him as 'the prince of this world'.

So what are we to make of this? Well some very interesting points have been made in that RESCUED program that we've been watching for several weeks now and it helps us answer this question. It speaks of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection as a battle campaign, the purpose of which is to defeat the works of the devil and take back the kingdom. Our part in this, our mission, should we decide to accept it, is to first recognize that we are in a spiritual battle. As Scripture says, our battle is not with flesh and blood, but with principalities and demons, and powers of this present darkness." So we have to know our enemy, and the first thing we need to know is that he doesn't like us. Why? Because in his pride, he didn't want to see us as superior to him and his fellow angels. He thought that he could be God. And that of course is what got him and the minions kicked out of heaven. So they're not happy campers and they want to get back at God by lying to

us. By accusing us. By tempting us, all with the ultimate purpose of destroying us, we who are made in the image and likeness of God.

Now, the most basic thing that a devil can do to us is to tempt us to do bad things. Basically, he wants to convince us to believe the same thing he convinced Adam and Eve to believe; namely, that we can be the masters of our own destiny. That we too can be gods. But we do indeed have that free will. It's just our decision as to what to do with it. Remember, last week, in the first reading, reach out your hand, and whatever you want, will be given to you. Be it good or evil.

God has given us an owner's manual for our life. We called it the Bible and within it, the Gospel stories of Jesus, the son of God, who came into the world to teach us how to be imitators of him, and to strive for holiness, and perfection. But we'll fall short. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. The spirit and the flesh war against each other so that part of the spiritual battle is within us.

Nevertheless, the Lord wants to equip us with the weapons of the war. Prayer, fasting, good works, adoration, and the use of the sacraments. And here, at the beginning of the season of Lent, I think we should mention one of the big weapons of the war, namely, the sacrament of confession, or reconciliation. It is the great gift of God in which we can always come back to him and be given a fresh start. A new beginning. Our communal penance service is on Thursday, March 16 and there will be others of course throughout our Vicariate beginning on March 8 and continuing right up to April 1.

On Ash Wednesday we spoke about the external practices of the Lenten season. But we don't literally put on sackcloth and sprinkle ashes over our heads. And we don't tear our clothes like they did in the old days. A little simple splash of ash on our forehead is pretty much it for us. Of course, we are encouraged to take on a penitential mode, and resolve to do something special, to give something up or do something that might be a little bit uncomfortable. To take up the cross. But the big admonition of the day came from a scripture passage which told us that the greater good is to rend our hearts, not our garments. Be concerned, not so much with the externals as the internals. A change of attitude. A resolve to be a better Christian. To love our neighbor more. And certainly to love God, ever more because of his great sacrifice for us.

But I think we need to say a little bit more about the devil. The first thing, he's real. A simple reading of scripture will certainly give you the impression that Jesus was dealing with a real person up there in the wilderness. This wasn't a figment of his imagination. He wasn't deluded. This wasn't a symbol. But you know that we have Catholic religious leaders who have publicly denied the reality of the devil. And these guys are actually collecting a paycheck.....from us. They should be sued for spiritual malpractice. You would think that if a man is ordained in the Catholic Church he would teach what the Catholic Church teaches.

But the devil works in many brilliant and mischievous ways and he's been successfully deceiving for a long, long time. Beginning with that story in the garden that we read today.

So, after persuading many people that he doesn't exist, one of the devil's most remarkable accomplishments has been the deceiving of very intelligent and sophisticated people down through the ages. These people, by virtue of their stature, have the ability to influence the masses. Most of the time it's subtle deceptions but in some cases it can be

pretty dramatic. Some people are very outspoken in their opposition of religion. Take for instance the French Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire. He once said publicly, and I quote, "Crush the accursed thing!" He was talking about us. And that very thing did happen during the French Revolution. The country that was once called the eldest daughter of the church, went crazy. The mob action called the Reign of Terror guillotined many people who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and believing the wrong thing. And the mob has raised its head many times since then. We've seen it many times recently and I fear we will see much more of it in days to come.

One of the things that we could all do this Lenten season is to do more reading. We have plenty of good books in our lending library and we have the latest in our bookstore. In preparation for this homily I casually picked up a book off my rectory bookshelf that I've found very helpful in preparing my thoughts for today. I actually opened up to the chapter called principalities demons and organizations and it talked about exactly the same things that we were talking about here. I recommend that book. It's called *A Church in Crisis. Pathways Forward*, by Ralph Martin,

Drawing on the wisdom and insights of many spirit filled writers, may we exercise our free will this Lent in ways that will be pleasing to Him up there. May Thy will be done, down here on earth, as it is in heaven. Amen.

+Fr. John