

## St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church sermon for the first Sunday in Lent 2022: "Satan quotes Scripture"

Have you ever noticed the most striking feature in today's Gospel story, the one we always read on the first Sunday in Lent? We always hear one of the three versions of Jesus' encounter with Satan after forty days of fasting in the desert. And in all three of the versions, Luke being no exception, the two have a remarkable conversation.

What's most remarkable about it is that they are actually doing the same thing! Jesus and Satan are both trying to make their points by quoting Scripture!

This is unsettling. It upends a much more comfortable notion of evil to which we might be tempted: a view of evil as something easily identifiable that bears no resemblance to the good. If that's what evil is, it's relatively easy to avoid and combat. But that isn't the way it usually works, is it?

Let's start with a clear understanding of who and what this pesky devil is. The verbal wrestling match between him and Jesus is not a competition between equals. As much as he might like it to be otherwise, Satan has no creative power whatsoever. Satan is a creature of God just like any other, not an equal and opposite force to God.

So Satan has to use as his raw material the creations of God, creations that are at the deepest level fundamentally good. He has no other tools at his disposal. Hence we find Satan quoting Scripture. The Scripture is good at its core, but Satan looks at it and thinks, "You know, if I can just take some of these words out

of context and twist their meaning just enough, I can produce a truly diabolical result.”

And it's not just Scripture. What is evil really, but a twisting and perversion, often even just a slight twisting and perversion, of the good? We see this in some of history's most horrific moments. The fascist nightmares of last century weren't born of a hunger for destruction. That would have been easy to spot and head off at the pass. They had at their roots a vision and desire for a utopian society, something that if rightly oriented can lead people to do wonderful things. But obviously it was not rightly oriented.

All it takes for things to go horribly awry is to take energetic movement toward the good and turn it just one degree off course. Satan is simply the personification of this. He quotes Scripture. He takes what is fundamentally good and turns it off course just enough to get a very different result than what was intended from the beginning.

This is the great challenge of the spiritual life. Things cannot be cleanly divided into categories of good and evil because evil is really just a misdirection of the good.

This is why this season of Lent calls us to a practice of lengthy and detailed self-examination. We're encouraged to go deep within and have a good, hard look at what we find there. Where might the good within us have gone just slightly off course? Where might our will and our desires misalign by just a bit with God's will and God's desires?

This is hard work, and it's never done. Since context and circumstances change with the passage of time, our work of self-examination and discernment needs to be ongoing.

Now this sermon probably sounds like a call to some pretty hard work, and it is. But there's also a piece of very good news here. The fact that Satan quotes Scripture tells us something very important: every single one of us, from ourselves all the way to the devil himself, is eligible for redemption. There is no one who has strayed so far as to be irredeemable. All things, alive or otherwise, are good, and even what appears to be pure evil is simply a misdirection of that good, something that still has the potential to get back on course.

This makes a huge difference in how we treat one another. How would we engage with one another if we were clear that even some of the most egregious behavior is a good desire misdirected?

Perhaps you have heard the phrase "cancel culture" in recent times. The idea is that if an individual says or does even one thing that doesn't align with the social and political sensibilities of his or her community of friends and followers, that person gets "cancelled." They are shunned and denied any platform they used to have, and the assumption is that this one misstep means that they are no longer worthy of any sort of friendship or trust.

Now this might not seem like a theological phenomenon, but I would suggest that it actually is. It is rooted in the belief that a

single ill-chosen word or action is indicative of a fundamentally flawed and irredeemable character. It is precisely the opposite of what we hear in today's message in which Satan quotes Scripture.

Today's message encourages us to be very, very hesitant to cancel. Even if someone presents to us words or behaviors that directly oppose views we hold very dear, we're encouraged to ask a key question that cancel culture never asks: could what we're seeing and hearing here somehow be rooted in the same good desires that we feel? Could this seemingly bad behavior simply be a misdirection of the good?

If so, cancelling is definitely not the answer. Engagement and redirection are the answer.

Now I know what I'm saying here is a hard thing in our current context, but wrestling with the hard things is what this season of Lent is all about. Between a pandemic and news of conflict near and far, most of us are in a state of greater fear and higher alert than usual. That makes the temptation to assume the worst of others, to cancel, and to shun higher than ever.

But that means that the need to do otherwise is also higher than ever. Perhaps our collective Lenten discipline can simply be to stay thoroughly engaged with one another, even when that proves very difficult.

The Bible tells us that Satan quotes Scripture and Jesus gives him a fair hearing. Given that, I think we should be able to find it in our hearts to make some space for one another, don't you?