
A Friend of the Devil

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The First Sunday of Lent, Year C

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. When the devil had finished every test, he departed from Jesus until an opportune time. --Luke 4.1,13

When I was seventeen years old --over five years ago-- I gave up all my rock music albums. I gave them away. I had quite a collection of rock music, and I was a true fan.

But I grew more religious in those days. I paid more attention to the movement of God's Holy Spirit in me, and -somehow- I heard that I was supposed to give away all my music. I don't really know --to this day I do not know-- whether it was the right thing to do. But it was sure the right thing at the time.

My pure devotion to music, and to rock music, was driving me away from something else. Somehow, I needed to purge myself of the distraction, the temptation, of music.

I know that rock music is not a bad thing. I know that music is not a bad thing, just like I know that alcohol is not necessarily a bad thing. Some folks have to give up alcohol for a while. For me, it was music. I had to give it up for a while.

And so I gave away all my rock music. Maybe some of you -right now-- have some of those old albums of mine! Maybe you purchased them from our friendly music store across the street.

Some of you know that I also play music. I played piano and keyboards for all sorts of music. And I stopped playing rock music, too, for a while.

Only gradually did I resume playing many of the old rock songs. But there was one song, one song in particular that I never played. Many of the bands I played in knew the song. They all played it. But I did not.

In fact, I did not start playing that rock song until only a few years ago. I didn't like it because of the title. It was by a great old band called *The Grateful Dead*. What a name, right?

Many of you know the name of the song I am referring to. It's called "Friend of the Devil." The chorus goes like this (I will not sing it): "I set out running but I take my time; a friend of the devil is a friend of mine."

It's really a great tune, but I refused to sing it. I could not bring myself to say that a friend of the devil is a friend of mine. I had seen too much of the devil's work. The words I preferred were "Get behind me, Satan." A friend of the devil is no friend of mine.

Then I read this gospel again, this same gospel passage we read this morning. Those of you who show up for church every First Sunday of Lent surely know the story. It is the story of Jesus, being led out into the wilderness by the Spirit, where he

was tempted by the devil, for forty days.

I think that, in the space of forty days, Jesus and the devil developed quite a relationship. Not that they didn't know each other already. But they sure got to know each other as Jesus prepared himself to enter the world of public ministry.

We all know that the devil is not the long-tailed fiery-red creature we see caricatured. The devil does not sit upon our shoulder with mean advice and a pitchfork. We know that the devil does not fit all those stereotypes. But, on the other hand, most of us do not imagine either that the devil might just be a rather normal conversation partner.

When I read this passage from Luke, chapter four, this marvelous passage of Jesus' conversation with Satan, it seems to me I am hearing the conversation between two wise and cagey spiritual sages. I think I am hearing two veteran rabbis, two religious scholars, swapping bible verses, and making points with each other.

Listen to them! The devil says, "Hey, you're hungry; that's a natural need. Turn the stone into bread." Jesus responds with a citation from scripture, "One does not live by bread alone." Point, counterpoint. They are having a religious debate.

The devil takes Jesus to see in an instant all the kingdoms of this world. They apparently belong to what Satan represents. "Worship me," Satan says, "and all this will be yours" Apparently, that is not a lie; the devil has real power in the kingdoms of this world. Jesus again responds with a reference from scripture.

So, finally, the devil uses scripture, too. He responds with his own biblical reference, "The bible says that God will command his angels to protect you; throw yourself down from the temple, and let God save you." And Jesus, again, makes the counterpoint; "it is written, do not put the Lord your God to the test."

This conversation is a spiritual debate. The suggestions of the devil were actually legitimate suggestions. After all, they would not have been temptations unless they made sense! "Earthly sustenance; material satisfaction; making sure that God loves you." Those were the points the devil was making. The three temptations were bodily sustenance, material satisfaction, and confirming that God loves you. Those are not necessarily bad things.

I imagine that Jesus and the devil knew each other quite well. They knew each other's strengths and weaknesses. They probably knew what each other was going to say. Jesus knows the devil. On another day that they were not having an argument, one might think they were friends.

Many of the great depth psychologists, the great psychoanalysts, follow Carl Jung's advice about knowing our shadow side. "Get to know your shadow side," they say. "Get in touch with your dark side." To put it simplistically: get to know your dark side so that it doesn't jump up and surprise you. Get to know your dark side so that you don't act out on those urges subconsciously. Maybe even make friends with your dark side.

In other words, get to know the devil. Maybe even become friendly with the devil. Take forty days, and go out into the wilderness. Stop your usual patterns of life, and explore who you really are for a while. That's what the forty-day wilderness experience was for Jesus. That's what the forty days of Lent are meant to be for us.

For a long time, I could not sing the song, "Friend of the Devil." "A friend of the devil is a friend of mine," Jerry Garcia sang; and I imagine he had no idea what he was saying.

But I do sing it these days. I sing it very seriously. The person who has been through the wilderness is someone I trust. That person is a friend of mine. The person who has got to know his dark side, his weaknesses, his vulnerabilities, his sins: that man is a friend of mine. A person who has become friendly with temptation and trial: that person is a friend of mine. The person who has battled through point and counterpoint in religious contests: she is a friend of mine. A friend of the devil is indeed a friend of mine.

Maybe even the people with whom we have our deepest conflicts and religious contests are friends of ours. Maybe the very conflict that is consuming the Anglican Communion and the Episcopal Church today is evidence that we really are in relationship with one another. We are two old religious sages having it out with each other. This is our wilderness.

Remember that Jesus was led by the Spirit. Jesus was led by the Spirit into his wilderness and into his trails with the devil. When the devil finally left Jesus, says the gospel, it was until an opportune time. It was not over, and it is never over. In this world, we will encounter trial and temptation. Lent is our opportunity to get to know the darkness, not so that we can succumb to it; but so that we can be led by the Spirit, through the darkness, and into the Light of Easter.

AMEN.

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