

The Devil's Advocate

There are few biblical celebrities as misunderstood as the anti-hero of today's gospel lesson. According to a 2002 poll, most adults in America (59 percent) do not view Satan as being real, preferring to see him only as a symbol or metaphor describing the principle of evil in our world.

Three out of four Roman Catholics and fifty-five percent of Protestants, mostly of a more liberal perspective, concur with this belief and choose to emphasize the importance of taking personal responsibility for our choices, and not blame the bad guy with little horns and a pitchfork for our problems.

However, a sizeable minority of adults in our country (34 percent) believe Satan to be an actual, living being with supernatural powers, sometimes rivaling the powers of God.

They argue that not to do so is explaining away the very palpable experience of evil, corruption, and destruction that we witness as human beings on a planet spinning out of control.

This later view is more in line with the pre-scientific worldview of biblical times, in which Satan was seen as a profoundly evil creature who "prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour," aided by countless demons with the

capacity of possessing the soul of a human being and engaging in spiritual warfare on a cosmic dimension.

Indeed, our own place of worship space here at St. Thomas portrays imagery and symbols confirming Satan's place in our Christian story. An interesting architectural curiosity of St. Thomas Church is that in the great cupola rising high over the altar visible only to clergy, liturgical ministers, and the left side of the East Transept (which very wisely is not occupied by anyone during the 8 am service) is a window that depicts flames and the devil's pitchfork. I kid you not. I bet you didn't realize until now what it takes to keep your clergy in line!

More relevant to today's gospel lesson is the portrayal of Christ being tempted by Satan as artistically presented in the eighth window here in the nave, towards the back, on my left.

Although there is not yet a consensus in our country or within the Christian faith about who or what Satan really is, he has been playing with our minds and our imaginations for centuries and points us to important questions about the nature of human corruption and redemption and, most of all, the search for a loving father.

No matter what you call him, assuming that Satan is a he and not a she, the devil (a/k/a the Adversary, Lucifer, the Prince of Darkness, The Tempter, Beelzebub, and the Serpent) is deeply rooted in our psyches and is likely to be in conversation with us

for a long, long time. So it makes perfect sense that we should try this morning to understand his or her seductive ways.

It's reassuring, in a strange way, that in the age of visual media, with all of the scary competition found in horror movies, the Devil still hasn't lost his charm, wit, or popularity. One of my favorite portrayals of Satan is found in the 1997 movie called *The Devil's Advocate*, which has grossed close to 153 million worldwide. It is a thriller/horror film which is a modern interpretation of poet John Milton's 17th century epic *Paradise Lost*, whose old English and dense verbiage have defeated many generations of college English students over the years, including yours truly.

The main characters in the movie are Kevin Lomax (played by Keanu Reeves) a highly successful and ambitious attorney (no offense, Father Lex) from Gainesville, Florida who has never lost a case. The opening scene has Lomax defending a schoolteacher against a charge of child abuse.

During the trial, Lomax realizes that his client is guilty. Rather than resign from the case or accept defeat, he decides to ignore his conscience and aggressively cross-examines the young child witness, destroying her credibility and thereby winning the case for the guilty teacher. He is then recruited by the senior law partner of a wealthy New York law firm, who ironically goes by

the name of John Milton, and delivers a devilish invitation to Lomax to come to the big leagues for the big money.

One of my favorite scenes from the movie is reminiscent of Jesus being shown all the kingdoms of the world that can be his if he will only follow and obey Satan. Lomax is taken to the top of a very high building and is shown where he will now be living as a first perk of belonging to the law firm. It is a beautiful, spacious penthouse with waterfalls and a panoramic view of Manhattan. Lomax's eyes light up with amazement, showing complete ignorance about the huge cost that will be made to his health, marriage, and his soul.

What I like best about the film is the insightful portrayal of Satan as the one who wants us to believe that he is the wise and helpful father who will take care of us and thereby finds an opening in our hearts to enter. He takes care of us by believing in us and our gifts, encouraging us to pursue our dreams and life goals and passionately to go after our heart's deepest desires.

At each point that Lomax confronts Milton about the immorality of what he is tempting him to do, Milton's devilish ways are revealed in his reply: "I was only helping you obtain what you told me you most deeply wanted from life: fame, fortune, power. I have only tried to be your trusted friend."

Deep within every human being is the desire and need to be loved unconditionally and to be offered guidance during times of confusion and uncertainty in our lives. No matter how healthy our parents were or are, they are only capable of imperfectly loving us.

Some of you may feel that you have only known conditional love your entire lives, or perhaps have wondered if you have every truly been loved at all. Welcome to the great wilderness of self-doubt that I believe even Jesus struggled with. Why else would Satan try to begin two of his temptations with these sly words, “Jesus, if you are the Son of God...”? Planting seeds of doubt within our hearts seems to be Satan’s specialty.

Despite how the lectionary has divided today’s Gospel reading from Luke, the backdrop for today’s story really starts not in the desert, but in the water of the Jordan River with Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist. This is a powerful scene in which John the Spirit of God descends like a dove and lands on Jesus, and the heavenly Father says, in the most loving way possible, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

God promises the same love to each and every one of us. It is through baptism that our faith commitments are made, our loyalties confirmed, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit activated, reassuring us of the unbreakable bond established between us and an unselfish and perfect Creator. It is through this grace

that we receive the courage to embark on the wilderness journey to which we are all called. God's amazing grace ... no one should leave home without it!

God is the perfect parent who does not lie or manipulate us into giving Him our respect and affection like Satan does, but offers us the no-strings-attached choice to be in a loving and life-giving relationship that lasts forever.

As we travel together through Lent, let all of us rest in the complete confidence that there is nothing that you and I can do to get God to love us more, and nothing we can do to get God to love us less. This has become a big theme song here at St. Thomas and, in my mind, it cannot be emphasized enough, as it is at the foundation of the spiritual life as a grace-filled people of hope moving forward towards Easter.

Jesus was led into the wilderness not by Satan and forces of evil, but by the Holy Spirit, confirming that forces of God's goodness and mercy are ultimately in control of our spiritual journeys, however difficult they may be.

On Ash Wednesday we remembered that we are but dust and to dust we shall return, and Father Lex reminded us that all of our ego projects must die and become ashes. By Easter, having traveled through the wilderness of our insecurities and fears about who we truly are and whose we truly are, we will arrive through faith to a place of new life, remembering that it is from

love that we have come and it is to love we shall return. By Easter, we hope to no longer be tempted as strongly by what we say we want, but will have been led by the power of the Holy Spirit to what God has revealed that we most deeply need.

Today we give thanks for all of our temptations, even Satan himself, the original devil's advocate, for leading us by the power of the Holy Spirit to the truth about ourselves, each other, and the condition of our souls, and thereby leading us to a more authentic relationship with Christ.

As one reviewer of *The Devil's Advocate* put it so well, it is not until one has "gone further than one intended to go, stayed longer than one intended to stay, and paid more than one intended to pay" that we can truly see the consequences of our sin and our need for the gloriously redemptive work of Christ in our lives and in the lives of those we love. Amen.