

March 6, 2022

# First Sunday in Lent

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St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Luke 4:1-13

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16



There is nothing like starting Lent with a little metaphysics. For those of you whose philosophy may be a tad rusty, “metaphysics” is the study of existence itself: asking what it means for something to exist and what different sorts of existence there might be. I think it is good to begin Lent with a little metaphysics not simply as an act of penance, though it might be that for some, but because we begin Lent with the story of Jesus in the wilderness, tempted by the evil one, and this first Sunday in Lent is a chance. For us to get a better grasp of what it means in the Baptismal covenant when we renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of evil that rebel against God. So, it is good to ask what sort of existence evil has and to inquire into what it actually is.

St. Augustine famously spoke of evil as *privatio boni*, literally, a privation of goodness, an absence or lack of a goodness that should be present. He wrote, “In the bodies of animals, disease and wounds mean nothing but the absence of health... Just in the same way, what are called vices in the soul are nothing but privations of natural good” (Enchiridion ch. 11). Evil is like a wound in existence, a kind of nothingness that afflicts things; it is a thing’s existing in a diminished way. To some, the claim that evil exists only as an absence, a lack of a goodness, might make it sound as if evil were somehow unreal, which flies in the face of our experience of evil. But, as the theologian Herbert McCabe noted, the fact that the hole in your sock exists only as a lack of sock where there should be sock in no way suggests that the hole in your sock is unreal. And likewise, the characterization of evil as a lack of goodness where there should be goodness in no way suggests that evil is unreal.

I feel a question coming on, and it has to do with Satan. Maybe you are good believing that Evil is Alive and real – the news from the last week has been convincing enough – but do we have to personify it, paint it red, give it little horns and supply it a pitchfork, and call it Satan? The name Satan simply means the Liar. Notice how in today’s gospel Jesus confronts the primal lies that confront human existence – the lie of the quick fix in bread; the lie of seizing absolute

political power; and the lie of putting God under our control. Satan is a personification of the lies that infect our collective consciousness. Again, lies only exist in relation to the truth, so Satan is a name for the evil that antagonizes the human longing for truth. Whether you personify it or not doesn't worry me; as long as you so yearn to be a person of the truth that you are awake to the untruth sown in our world.

But even if we find this metaphysical account of evil convincing there remains the other question of what difference any of this has in the day-to-day struggle against the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God. Are their practical implications to all this metaphysics? I would argue that there are at least two.

First, we can be tempted to think that some people or things are purely evil, possessed of no goodness at all. But, in fact, you can't have all hole and no sock. If the hole in my sock were to expand to the point where there were no sock there would be no longer any hole either. Likewise with evil; if it exists as a flaw within goodness, then it needs some goodness within which to exist. There is, in this sense, no such thing as "pure evil," but only "wounded goodness." The things by which we are tempted tempt us because they are good; temptation is not the desiring of evil, but desiring some good in the wrong way: desiring too much food, desiring the wrong sexual partner, desiring success at the cost of others. Food and sex and success are all good things, but we can desire them in the wrong way. And desire itself is a good thing: we desire because we are alive and that is certainly a good thing. After forty days of fasting, Jesus is hungry, and his hunger is good, a sign that his body is functioning properly. But desire can become twisted, misdirected; it can become the occasion for temptation. If there were such a thing as pure evil, we could resist it quite easily; but temptation grows from the fact that evil is always lodged in good in ways that are difficult to untangle.

Second, we can be tempted to think that we can overcome evil simply by eliminating the people and things we judge to be evil. But if you have a hole in your sock, you can't get rid

of it by cutting it out with a pair of scissors; you end up only making the hole larger. The hole must be repaired, reknitted, restored.

Likewise, you can't eliminate evil from the world simply by eliminating all the evil people. Since evil only exists as entangled with good, our attempts to eliminate evil often result in our inflicting further damage on the good. This is one reason why the Church has come to reject the use of the death penalty, seeing that it does not remedy evil but only implicates us in it. Just as you can only eliminate a hole in your sock by knitting the sock back together, so too you can only eliminate evil by restoring the good it is afflicting. As St. Augustine says, the only way to truly destroy your enemies is to make them into your friends. It is love that brings about this repair, and we call this repair "conversion."

Of course, in a world at war all this may be a hard pill to swallow. Can we really see someone like Vladimir Putin not as pure evil but as wounded good? Can we really believe that the evil being perpetrated in Ukraine can be healed by love? Wouldn't it be easier, as some have suggested, simply to take Mr. Putin out?

It is hard not to think so. But the narrow way of the Gospel that Jesus calls us to walk is an invitation to mercy and forgiveness; it calls us to see evil as damage and to pray for the conversion of our enemies even as we pray for healing for their victims. Above all, the Gospel calls us to see the wounded good in ourselves, to see ourselves as those in need of repair, those in need of conversion. And in this Lenten season Christ invites us to seek through God's power that which seems impossible for us but which faith tells us is possible for God.

Let us pray that, in the weeks ahead, God would turn us from the nothingness of evil, back to himself, the source of all goodness, to let grace repair the evil in our own hearts so that we, in turn, can bring his healing to our world. And may God have mercy on us all.