

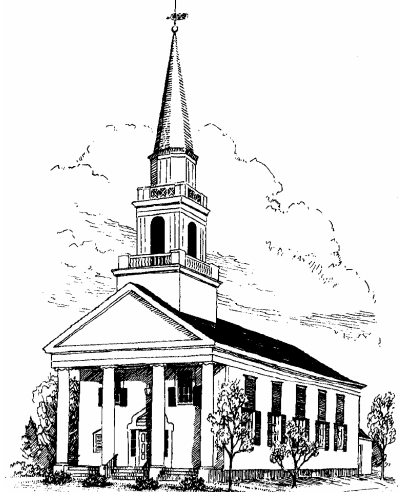
Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from March 1, 2009

Rev. Ann M. Aaberg
“The Devil Within”

Scriptures:
Psalm 25:1-10
Matthew 4:1-11



I had a professor in seminary who was an expert on Satan. [That is not to say that he was satanic, although some students may have wondered...] No, Professor Mobley is an expert on the history of the development of our concept of Satan and he wrote a book about it with a colleague called *The Birth of Satan – Tracing the Devil’s Biblical Roots*. It’s a fascinating account of the development of the devil in the Bible, looking at:

- the ancient myths which preceded authorship of the Bible,
- the vast historical context over many, many centuries in which the various books in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament were written where the devil appears,
- the foreign influences upon Jewish culture during those times which contributed to the evolution of the devil,
- the influence of Greek and Western European and American literature on how we view Satan,
- and a host of many other factors which may have us imagining a red, horned, pointy-tailed creature hopping around Jesus in our gospel reading this morning.

Professor Mobley and his co-author basically purport that somewhere in the development of our understanding of God as one God and as all-loving, as the author of all blessings, humanity had to do something with the wrathful, punishing part of God who doled out misfortunes, because God can’t be both. And they took a look at our understanding of good always being rewarded and evil always being punished and somehow had to explain why, if this was so, and the Jews were basically doing the right thing all the time, why Jerusalem would be completely destroyed and their people hauled off to Babylonia. How does one explain this grave undeserved misfortune, or for that matter, disproportionate punishment or random tragedy? The Prince of Demons and his militia must be at work disrupting things.

Now, we will not solve this morning the questions surrounding the origins of evil or how it operates in the world or in the cosmos, but it is helpful to examine who this devil, this Satan, is in our reading this morning as we embark on our own individual Lenten journeys this week.

Of the many translations and roles offered for Satan, the one which best describes his role in the New Testament, especially in our passage this morning is obstacle, stumbling block, impediment, the tempter who blocks the path of Jesus on his messianic journey. Mobley writes, in fact, that Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is a foundational Satan story.

After his baptism in the river Jordan by John the Baptist, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness in preparation for his ministry. Our Matthean text this morning reads he "was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." Mark's version says "the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness". Luke writes "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness."

He fasted for forty days and forty nights, which we adopt as our season of Lent, but which also refers back to the Israelites' wandering in the desert wilderness for forty years. Most biblical scholars agree simply that the number 40 signifies a really long time. Jesus is fasting day and night in the wilderness for a long time and he is famished. Of course, that's when the tempter comes, knowing who Jesus is and attempting to trip him up and his ministry. He tries to get him to perform a magic trick, he slyly quotes Hebrew Scripture, he offers him worldly power, but each time Jesus responds against him and the devil finally leaves.

Who is this guy? He hangs out in the wilderness, where it's desolate, sparse, lonely, intimidating, foreboding, and the way out and when is unknown. He doesn't show up on Day 1. He waits until Day 40 or beyond. He waits until his object is at his weakest. He understands basic human physical needs and how they drive us to desperation. He knows his scripture and knows how to use it to justify his proposal. And he makes you think he can deliver the world. All you have to do is cut corners, take a few risks, and do some bowing. And, given the circumstances, you might even begin to think that God sent him.

Who is this guy? I think I've met him. My guess is that we've all met him. And just as our limited language and human experience makes God a "him" when we know God is beyond human gender, we call this tempter "him" as well, knowing full well that this disruptive stumbling block that gets in our way to God is something much more than a red pest with a forked tail. Professor Mobley points us back to the chaos monsters, the composite beings, the hybrids humanity has used over the centuries to depict this force: half humans with wings or hooves or tails or deep sea monsters.

It seems that this devil, this Satan, can take on as many forms as there are people in the world. We all have a demon or two which disrupts our lives, who jumps out on our path when we least expect it, to tempt us, to impede our well-intentioned journeys. We have all been witnesses when it takes on massive proportions in our world, in our societies, when it appears that entire nations, complete cultures have been derailed and lost their way. But as we begin Lent, we are called to examine our own personal individual demons. What are the obstacles in our lives that get in the way of our deepening our relationships with God? I won't even begin to name the possibilities, because you already know in your heart what yours are.

For Jesus, from our scripture reading this morning and from knowing the path of the remainder of his earthly life, we can imagine that at the beginning of his ministry, being aware of

his power and his future, it would be just so easy for the fully human nature in Jesus to resort to magic and change a few stones into bread when he was hungry, or take to the air in flight when things got dangerous, or to choose, instead of suffering and crucifixion and death, the kingdoms and splendor of the world.

But he doesn't. He does not succumb to the temptations of Satan. Because Jesus is an expert on Satan, and, thanks to Jesus and the God who so loved the world who sent him, we can be, too. We can recognize when we're in the wilderness and have no idea how or when we'll get out, when we're at our weakest and have become prime targets, when scripture is being used to fool us, when the so-called splendor of the world has tripped us up. When short cuts and foolish risk-taking will lead to our own destruction.

And, thanks to Jesus, we have the truth in our spiritual back pockets to counterattack the one, whether it be an external source or from a mysterious place within, who would try to confuse us with temptations and false promises.

Friends, however, we try to explain its source, its reason, we know there is evil in the world and we know what we humans are capable of. And we know we sometimes land in the wilderness not knowing the way out, but beginning today, this week, this season of Lent we are presented with an incredible opportunity to face our demons and, with the strength of Christ, to send them away. To remove the obstacles. To continue unencumbered on our paths toward healing and wholeness. To find our way out of the wilderness by seeking forgiveness and discovering forgiveness in our hearts for others. Today we can begin to imagine splendor different from the kingdoms this world offers, offered by Jesus, the expert on temptation, yes, but also the expert on mercy and compassion and eternal love. Away with you, Satan! Amen.

