

Lent 1 Sermon  
The Rev. Megan Dembi

Anyone here who has ever had kids, or likely anyone that remembers being a kid, has probably heard of the boogeyman—the mythical monstrous creature that lives inside of closets or under beds just waiting to attack helpless children. Depending on what kind of house you lived or grew up in, the boogeyman may have been someone who watched over children to make sure they were behaving like they were supposed to—to check up on kids while they were supposed to be cleaning their rooms or brushing their teeth or playing nicely with their siblings. And if the boogeyman saw a child not doing what their parents asked or acting naughty, the boogeyman would go after that child to scare them, or if the transgression was bad enough, even steal the child away from home. For a child, the boogeyman was terrifying.

However, as we grow up we learn that the boogeyman isn't real. There is no one hiding under our beds to make sure we don't stay up and play games when it's past our bedtime. There is no one watching us from the closet to make sure we do our chores. The threat of the boogeyman completely loses its power when we get older. This makes sense, as the boogeyman isn't real. But the implications of growing up with this idea of the boogeyman, only to realize that the threat was never real as we get older, becomes interesting when we think about how the boogeyman and Satan often get connected together. In fact, in some cultures "boogeyman" is merely a nickname for the Devil.

On the surface, we can see how the boogeyman and Satan can become equivalent in some people's minds. Both are often thought of as creatures waiting for us to slip up, waiting for us to do something bad so that they may punish us in some way. So just as the idea of the boogeyman becomes ridiculous in our minds as we get older, so might the idea of Satan. This is especially true when we think of Satan as a half-man, half-goat creature with a pitchfork and horns, who lives in an underground realm full of fire. And it's true that a Satan like that, like the boogeyman, is not real, but merely a made-up story used to frighten people. However, our readings today remind us that not only is Satan at work in the world, his ways are much more crafty than a simple boogeyman, or a half-goat with a pitchfork.

In the reading from Genesis, Adam and Eve had been commanded by God to not eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And they had intended to keep God's command. However, the serpent interferes. He confronts the woman innocently enough, as if he was asking for clarification on God's commands. "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" The woman clarifies that it is only the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that may not be eaten from, lest they die. So the serpent tries to change the woman's mind, telling her that if she eats of the tree, she will know good and evil, just as God does. The woman is persuaded by these words, and eats from the tree, as does the man. This tale of creation shows us how Satan operates. Satan can take on many forms, in this case, the form of the serpent, in order to tempt humans into breaking the commandments of God. And Satan can do this in a very subtle way. To the woman, the serpent's questions and comments seemed innocent enough. And the serpent made it seem so reasonable for her to break God's commands. After all, what bad could come of being able to know the difference between good and evil, like God?

Satan operates in much the same fashion in the Gospel reading. In it Jesus is in the wilderness, fasting and seeking to resist temptation. After forty days of fasting, Jesus was understandably hungry. Satan sees this opportunity and tells Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." Once again, Satan comes off as being very reasonable. Jesus is hungry. Why not create some food for himself? But Jesus is wiser than Adam and Eve and refuses to give in to temptation. So he responds to Satan by quoting the book of Deuteronomy, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of

God.”

However, Satan will not relent. He has discovered something that seems to be important to Jesus, scripture, and so he tries to use that very thing to tempt Jesus. “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down,” Satan tells Christ, and backs up this statement by quoting the Psalms, “He will command his angels concerning you. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” Jesus, once again, sees through Satan and responds again by quoting from Deuteronomy, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

These interactions show how insidious the work of Satan can be. No Satan is not a half-man, half-goat with a pitchfork, and THAT is what makes Satan dangerous. Satan is a force, a force that leads people into temptation and away from the commandments of God who can work through others, as he did with the serpent in the garden. And the temptations of Satan can make breaking the commands of God seem reasonable. Eating the fruit will make you wise. Why not make bread if you are hungry? Perhaps even more concerning, Satan can misuse scripture in order to try to lead people astray. We must keep this in mind when we hear others quote scripture in order to justify acting in hateful ways. Yes, Satan is at work in the world and Satan is dangerous, because he can work through others in seemingly innocent ways to lead us into sin.

But what can we do to resist Satan if Satan can work through anyone and use anything, even scripture, to tempt us to break God’s commands? The psalmist gives us some helpful advice. “Do not be like horse or mule, which have no understanding; who must be fitted with bit and bridle, or else they will not stay near you.” We should not go through life passively hoping to be led down the right path. If we wish to follow the commands of God and avoid the works of Satan attempting to lead us astray, we must take hold of the reins—to nurture our faith so that we can better understand the will of God and be better equipped to follow it. Because if we don’t put effort into learning about our faith ourselves, we can be more easily led astray. We must pray and engage in spiritual practices throughout the week, not only on Sundays. We must know scripture well enough that we can properly interpret passages that may be used by Satan or others to lead us astray. We must also use our God-given ability to think and reason in order to understand what God is trying to teach us through scripture. It is all too easy for us to sin by neglecting to discern whether the paths that we are lead to believe are right truly are right. So let us instead resolve to not be lead astray, but be willing to do whatever is necessary, even if it is difficult, to follow the commandments of God, with God’s help. Amen.