If you worship me, all this will be yours (January 26, 2020)


Let us pray. Un-stop our ears, O God, that we may hear your Word proclaimed this day. Free us from the temptations of worry, doubt, arrogance, and pride. Teach us, Lord, so that we may follow you more faithfully. I pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Libraries (and reading) have been part of my life as long as I can remember. I enjoyed going to the public library as a child, I volunteered in my high school library, and I spent 16 years working as a librarian before I accepted God’s call into ordained ministry. I am still an active user of libraries to this day. If libraries are not part of your experience, there is one piece of trivia that you need to know about libraries – there is always a line up outside to come in at the beginning of the day. Rain or shine – this is a fact. For many years, I stood on the inside looking out at the line and now I am back on the outside looking in. When I write my sermon at the Burlington Public Library, there is always a line up of people, including an elderly gentleman who comes in to read the newspaper. He is a veteran and is very proud of his military service. He and I have had casual conversations over the years while we wait for the library doors to open, but this week, we broke the barrier from small talk into a much deeper conversation. He asked me if I am a student who comes here to study. After thanking him for thinking that I am young enough to be a student, I told him about what I do for a living. His reply was not what I expected – Oh, I don’t believe in God anymore. He then proceeded to tell me about his service as an airman during the Vietnam War and because of what he saw overseas, he is convinced that there is no God. He said to me - how can God allow so much war and suffering to happen in our world? He also told me about a chaplain who prayed for them before every mission and then they were told to go out and kill the enemy. Which he did.

My answer while standing in the atrium of the Central Branch of Burlington Public Library, was this – I believe in God and I also believe in the devil. Satan is alive and well and sometimes it seems that evil is winning. And then we went our separate ways.

How would you have replied to him?
I cannot provide an answer to why there is so much suffering in our world. And to be honest, I don’t think that anyone can. People who much smarter than I am have tried, but they all come short up of a satisfactory answer. Of course, we do have pieces of the puzzle – we do know that WE are the cause of many of the problems that our world faces today. We have manipulated the food chain – from pesticides on crops to growth hormones in livestock to preservatives in prepared foods – have we not altered what we put in our mouths in a way that is detrimental to our health and wellbeing in the long run? Pharmaceutical companies develop life saving drugs, but have also created a global opioid crisis. The global economy – and our demand for cheap goods – uses millions of workers who are very close to being slave labour whether we want to admit it of not. We continue to allow governments to create and own weapons of mass destruction. Over the years, governments have passed laws and policies that do not protect people or our planet. We have polluted our environment to the brink of disaster. What’s worse is that we actually have the capabilities to end world hunger and to slow climate change. But we can’t agree on whether we should or not.

In many ways, the human race is its own worst enemy.

But is there another enemy out there? As Christians we believe that there is. The forces of evil – the devil, Satan, or whatever you want to call it – are alive and well. These forces have been present since Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and continue to exist to this day. Scripture teaches us that they will only be destroyed when Christ comes again in his glory. And while we wait for the second coming of Christ, our perfect teacher – Jesus – shows us how to resist temptation and the evil forces that seek to destroy our lives, our communities, and our world.
But the story of the temptation of Christ that we just read cannot be viewed in isolation – it has to be told along with the story of Jesus’ baptism, which we did last week.\(^1\) As I said last Sunday, Jesus’ baptism was profoundly significant for him. In that public proclamation of Jesus’ ministry of forgiveness and salvation, he took on the sins of the world and received a blessing from his heavenly Father. The heavens were ripped open, the Spirit of God descended, and God said, you are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased. (Luke 3:22)

It is with this blessing of God that Jesus went into the wilderness.

Jesus did not go it alone in the wilderness when he met the devil. He went with the power of God.

The presence of God is a game changer in the wilderness. It was for the Israelites. It was for Jesus. It is for us.

Let’s face it, we will never be like Christ – we are not the only begotten Son of God nor are we without sin. Time and again we fall short of the standards of God. Over and over again we give into the temptations that Satan puts before us. We are weak and selfish. We are arrogant and proud. It is our arrogance and pride which hurt us the most when it comes to temptation because we believe (wrongly!) that we can do this on our own. It’s okay, God, I got this. I don’t need your help. I can manage on my own.

But we can’t. And we don’t.

We NEED God’s help. We need to cling to the presence of God. As we read in Psalm 91 today, we need to seek refuge under God’s wings. (Psalm 91:4) We have to stop pretending that the wisdom of our own eyes is good enough. It is only with God’s help that we have any hope of resisting temptation and the forces of evil all around us. The Rev. Dr. Karoline Lewis, Professor

\(^1\) You are my Son, the Beloved. [https://www.knoxburlington.ca/recent-sermons](https://www.knoxburlington.ca/recent-sermons)
of Preaching at the Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota put it this way - our greatest temptation [is] the temptation to think that God is not present.²

When we trust in this profound promise that God is with us always, we can quote with confidence the book of Deuteronomy as Jesus did – we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. (Deuteronomy 8:3) When Satan offers takes us to the mountaintop and offers us everything if we fall down and worship him, we can say to Satan, no thanks. We’ve got this – not I’ve got this, but we’ve got this – because God is on our side. Whether you are dealing with temptation in your own life or are aware of evil forces at work around you or trying to find meaningful ways of being a better citizen of this world or are struggling with a sense of doubt that God even exists – I want you to know that God is real and true and his blessing is present with each of us through the Holy Spirit. God’s presence is indeed a game changer. (And I’m not talking about the Super Bowl next week!) Jesus Christ is our Lord and Saviour. He is our refuge and our strength. And because he loves us, we can face whatever challenges come our way. We are safe under his everlasting wings. (Psalm 91)

And Satan will lose in the end. Amen.

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