

A word of warning to the parents and godparents of the three children who will be baptized today: the devil doesn't show up in Jesus' life until after he is baptized.

The story of Jesus' temptation follows almost immediately the story of his baptism, so maybe having the little one baptized will make things worse, not better.

And it's hard to prepare for the devil's arrival, since there's some question about who the devil is and what he's all about.

In one strain of biblical tradition, the devil is God's enemy, but in another, he is the tester, on God's payroll as a servant who with savvy examinations reveals the true character of a human heart.

Whether the devil is a real being or not is another question, one I have enjoyed debating with parishioners here, and I usually end up quoting C.S. Lewis, who has written:

*There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils.*

*One is to disbelieve in their existence.*

*The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.*

*They themselves are equally pleased by both errors, and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight. (from the Preface to The Screwtape Letters)*

I tend to suspect that devil speculation is itself a form of temptation.

In any case, the devil appears in our story as a voice that sounds only too familiar, and whether he stands before Jesus or lurks inside his head, Jesus hears him loud and clear.

We know from our own lives that the voice is somehow very real, and it is hard to resist in part because--did you notice?--the devil is full of Bible quotes and good ideas.

Turning a stone to bread, quietly, unassumingly, is not unreasonable after 40 days of hunger.

Jesus himself will provide bread out of nowhere for a hungry crowd later in the gospel.

Control of the kingdoms of the world would streamline ministry immensely and save Jesus from plenty of headaches, not to mention the cross, and position him well to make a difference.

Throwing himself off the temple, complete with Psalm 91 references at the press conference, would be a terrific way to introduce oneself, far better marketing than that disastrous sermon Jesus preaches in Nazareth which makes the crowd want to throw him off a cliff instead.

The devil's suggestions are reasonable, practical, effective.

And Jesus says no.

We have recovered in our new hymnals the old practice of following Jesus before baptism by saying no to the devil three times ourselves.

We renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God, which is the easiest part, then proceed to the deeper and more delicious temptations...the powers of this world that rebel against God--powers we tend to schmooze and align ourselves with like money and security and those who can provide them--and then the ways of sin that draw us away from God, whether they are addictions that drag us away kicking and screaming or soft undertows that, subtle and unseen, lure us into a slow and imperceptible drift.

For those of us not besieged by hunger and surrounded by desert emptiness, it is more likely those quiet, unexamined ways hiding in plain view that most threaten us.

That is why, in its ancient wisdom, the church year pushes us out into the wilderness to witness Jesus wrestle with the tempter in a strikingly stark setting.

The sheer, unbending quiet of the desert night air helps us to hear the voices more clearly.

The silence and solitude focus our attention.

Lent works to replicate this barren, open landscape in our busy, cluttered lives so that we have the space and the silence ourselves to hear and pay attention to the voices in our heads, the baptismal voice that loves us and the good idea voice that doesn't, that diabolical impersonator who works so hard to sound almost the same.

This voice quotes Scripture, but only slightly out of context, just a little off-key so that you would never notice it in the choir but you do hear it when you tune everything else out and really listen to it sing solo.

The protections promised in Psalm 91 are there for those who are pushed into danger, not those who push themselves; the devil conveniently omits that detail, but Jesus knows it, so he passes on that temptation and passes the test.

And in doing so, he shows us what to do to navigate the devil's mental minefields.

He does exactly what the author of Deuteronomy teaches us to do.

He remembers.

He remembers the sound of the real voice, and the saving story of the real God.

As Karen Stetins wrote so well in this week's email devotion, Lent is not about the *what* but about the *why*.

The disciplines of this stark season--prayer, generosity, fasting (whether from meat or chocolate or technology or television or whatever you have given up for Lent)--are intended to help us hear and remember and pay attention to the right voice.

To do that, we have to know and remember the story.

That is why we make parents promise to teach their children the creed, the Lord's Prayer, the ten commandments, and the Bible.

That is why we make parents select godparents who will help, support and challenge them to keep their storytelling promises.

That is why, just before the baptism, we say a prayer that stretches from the Spirit moving over the face of the waters at creation to the Spirit moving over the face of the waters right then and there...to rehearse and remember the story, to tune our ears to hear the voice that loves and calls and claims and commissions us, to remember who we really are.

We don't just give our first fruits, the first cut of our income as offering; we share it gratefully with a story. *A wandering Aramean was my ancestor... an immigrant Swedish woman was my mother... I once was lost, but now am found... This is how God has been good to me...*

The first fruits offering, the baptism, the sharing of Communion, the words of the prayers that tell the story, the Lenten discipline, the bedtime lesson in memorizing the Lord's Prayer...these are all acts of remembrance, strategies for training our ears and hearts to know and recognize the real God's voice and our real selves to whom it speaks such steadfast love.

Parents of Marcus and Layla and Kathrine, look at your child.

God has been good to you.

People of Resurrection, newcomers and oldtimers, members and visitors, look around you, and look at your life.

God has been good to you...even if life and others haven't.

Whether you are sitting pretty in the promised land or surrounded by nothing, starving with Jesus in a barren wilderness, look hard at your life and listen long and hard to the voices.

Obvious or not, God has been good to you.

Share the story.

Not only so that others will be blessed by hearing it, but so that you will remember it too.

Because the devil will return to you at an opportune time.

And because God never left.

Do you hear the difference?