

A BUSY DAY FOR THE DEVIL
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Texts: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 & Matthew 4:1-11

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Today is a busy day for the devil. He starts out in the Garden of Eden, where he successfully tempts the first woman and the first man.

Then he heads out into the wilderness, where he unsuccessfully tempts Jesus. If we want to get technical, though, the tempters in these two stories are not the same person. The one in Genesis is called *ha-nahash*, which in Hebrew simply means serpent. The one in Matthew is called *diabolo*, which in Greek means “one who attacks, misleads, deceives, diverts, or discredits.”

So they’re not one-and-the-same, but they may as well be because they both use the same tactic. They both play the same game. They both try to confuse people and fool them into giving up the life God wants for them. So in Genesis, when God tells the woman and the man that they can eat from any tree in the Garden except for that one over there, Ha-nahash plucks a piece of that nice, juicy forbidden fruit and says, *Doesn't this look yummy?* And in Matthew, after Jesus has been out in the desert for forty days with nothing to eat, Diabolo comes along and says, *You must be starving. Why not turn one of these rocks into a nice, warm, crusty loaf of bread?*

You have to admit, it’s a pretty good strategy—using the thing people want most in order to manipulate them. And I’m not talking about food. I’m talking about power. That’s what these temptations are really about. They’re about having the power to be fully self-reliant, so you don’t have to listen to anyone else, and you don’t have to depend on anyone else, including God. In the Garden, that means having the power to set your own boundaries and decide for yourself what your limits are, if any. In the wilderness, it means having the power to be your own provider and satisfy your own needs and wants. It also

means, if you look at the second and third temptations, having the power to preserve your own life and rule over everyone else.

So you might say Ha-nahash and Diabolo are one-trick ponies. But it’s a really good trick. They do the same thing over and over, not because they can’t come up with anything better, but because they don’t have to. They’re like dogs. A few years ago, when my dog was a puppy, we took her to obedience class, and I remember the trainer explaining dog behavior in four words: “Dogs do what works.” Dogs do whatever is going to get them that treat, whether their owners like it or not. They’re the ultimate pragmatists. And so are Ha-nahash and Diabolo. They do what works. They dangle power in front of us—the power to essentially be our own god so we don’t have to rely on the real God for anything. And they keep doing that over and over because we fall for it every time—which says something about us.

It says we’re never quite satisfied with what we’ve got, and we’re never completely happy with who we are. No matter how much we accumulate and accomplish, it’s never enough. There’s always an emptiness inside us that remains. Somewhere in the back of our minds, we’re always a little bit insecure about our worth compared to other people. Somewhere deep down, we’re always a little bit afraid that what they have is better than what we have, and who they are is better than who we are. And that goes all the way back to the Garden. It’s the human condition. It’s our fundamental anxiety. It’s why Ha-nahash doesn’t have to ask twice when he offers the woman the fruit, and why she doesn’t have to ask twice when she turns around and offers it to the man. Because they feel like they’re missing something, even though they have everything they could

possibly want. It's because they feel like they're somehow less than, even though they're exactly who God made them to be.

So today is a very busy day for the devil. But the sad thing is, even though Ha-nahash and Diabolo are the ones doing all the running around, we're the ones who end up exhausted because we're the ones playing their game. We're the ones trying to be something we're not. But what's really sad is, not only do we end up exhausted, we end up alone, isolated, walled-off from everything and everyone by our own insecurities. Just look at what happens in the Garden. The woman and the man start out with nothing between them, literally naked, and they end up covering themselves, ashamed of who they are. They start out trusting in God, depending on God for their daily bread, and they end up breaking that trust and going their separate way.

And maybe that's the whole point. Maybe that's what Ha-nahash and Diabolo really want. Maybe what they're really trying to do is separate us—from each other, from God, and even from ourselves. Because that's the opposite of God's will for us. God didn't make us to be alone. God made us to be in relationship. That's one of the most basic things the creation story tells us. To be human is to be in relationship.

So how do we stop playing the devil's game? How do we stop falling for the same trick over and over? I think the answer is out there in the wilderness. Diabolo keeps putting these temptations in front of Jesus, but Jesus never feels like he has to prove anything to anyone. He's not anxious or insecure about who he is because he's completely grounded in his relationship with God, and he lets that be his rebuttal. When Diabolo says, *Why don't you tell these stones to*

become loaves of bread, Jesus answers, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." When Diabolo says, *Why don't you jump off the roof of the temple and let God save you*, Jesus answers, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." And when Diabolo says, *I'll give you the whole world if you give me your ultimate allegiance*, Jesus answers, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."

Every time Diabolo dangles power and autonomy in front of him, Jesus isn't even slightly tempted because he knows he already has everything he needs. There's no emptiness inside him that can be exploited. He's completely fulfilled by his relationship with God, and that gives him a peace and calm that nothing can disturb.

I've known a few people like that, but not many. For most of us, I think it's a lifelong journey to get there, and even then maybe we still have moments when we're tempted by the thought that who we are and what we have is not enough. So the best thing I can tell you when you're having a moment like that is to do what Jesus does—lean into your relationship with God and let it be your rebuttal; remind yourself that you are exactly who God made you to be, and there's nothing about you that's less than. Amen.