**The Devil Made Me Do It**

**Text: Matthew 4:1**

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If you are a person of a certain age, you can clearly recall comedian Flip Wilson saying, “The devil made me do it!” I think it was his character Geraldine who said it. She’d get in trouble with her boyfriend, Killer, and that would be her standard excuse: “The devil made me do it.”

Actually, the devil can’t *make* you do anything. But he can certainly try. God has gifted us with a radical freedom, and each one of us ultimately decides what we will or will not do. But we decide in the context of strong forces that encourage us to go one way or another. *Strong* forces; tempting forces; sometimes almost *overwhelming* forces:

The young man growing-up in poverty is tempted to use drugs and steal. The strong forces around him make it very difficult for him to choose a path other than drugs – *very* difficult – but in the final analysis, *he* decides.

The woman living in an abusive relationship feels trapped by the strong forces around her. And she very nearly is. But in the final analysis *she* is the one who decides to stay or leave; and that decision to leave takes incredible strength and courage.

We have around us, forces that try to steer us in the wrong direction. We are surrounded by forces that tell us lies, and tempt us to despair, and sometimes make it all but certain that we *will* go in that wrong direction. But we have *within* us the strength and the wisdom to *resist* those forces; to make a *better* decision; to go in the *right* direction. We have within us the grace of God.

The story of Jesus’ temptation is a story of the forces around us, and the grace within us. Jesus spends 40 days in the wilderness contending with those forces, and we have just begun a 40 day journey toward Easter when we will ponder some of those forces; and ponder as well the grace by which we are saved from them. Strong forces that threaten to undo us are part of the *context* in which life is lived: Jesus’ life, the life of the Early Church, and ours. Within that context there is great *conflict*. But God has made with the Church a *covenant* by which we can make our way through the wilderness of conflict and into the light of a new day.

So we’re talking today about context, conflict and covenant as they relate to temptation.

Let’s first consider the *context*: not only for Jesus’ temptation but also for the writing of the New Testament. The New Testament, you see, emerged from a time of conflicting forces not unlike our own.

Most of the New Testament was written during a period of roughly 75 years, beginning in the middle of the 1st century and extending into the early part of the 2nd century. Matthew and John – the 2 gospels that will be our focus during Lent – were written toward the middle and end of that period. As such, they tell us at least as much about the context in which they were written as they tell us about the historical Jesus. It was roughly 50 years after the Crucifixion that an early Christian whom we call Matthew put pen to paper and crafted his gospel. It was at least 10 years later – maybe as much as 45 years later – that another writer whom we call John wrote his take on Jesus’ life. That’s a lot of years during which words could be misunderstood, stories could be embellished, and context could influence memory and interpretation. I mean, if you’ve ever played the game of telephone, you know how words can be very innocently altered as a whispered message makes its way around the circle. And, you know what happens to stories. I’ve never met a good story that didn’t become a better story through embellishment. It does us no good to naively believe that Jesus’ words were somehow magically conveyed, just the way he said them, over those many years. The differences between the 4 gospels themselves tell us that words and stories have been altered. For example, it matters that Matthew has Jesus saying, “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt. 5:48), and Luke has him saying, “Be merciful, as your heavenly Father is merciful” (Lk. 6:36). The passages are so similar in framework and so different in meaning that it seems unlikely that Jesus said both things. Biblical scholars agree that Matthew and Luke, along with Mark and John, made some changes in the story to speak to the context in which each of their gospels was written. It’s important to try to figure out what the historical Jesus said, but it’s also important to figure out what each gospel writer was saying. And you have to know something of his context in order to discern his point. Because we want to hear what the *Risen* Christ – what the *Living* Word – is saying both to his context and to ours. But let’s be clear that it was still the Gospel – it was still God’s Word – that people heard *through* these stories of Jesus. And it is still God’s Word that *we* hear through these *same* stories. God uses an evolving tradition to speak to the Church as history evolves. That was true at the turn of the 2nd century, and it’s true today.

Let’s say a bit more about Matthew’s context. In his time, as in our own, everything seemed to be in flux. The Jewish Temple had been destroyed, the imperial grip of Rome was tightening, and multiple voices were competing to define the future direction of Judaism in the midst of the Roman occupation. It wasn’t clear if following Jesus would be the new norm for Judaism, or a new religion in its own right. And there were even competing notions of what it meant to follow Jesus. So many voices, so many forces, so many temptations to move first this way, and then that. Who was right? Who was wrong? Who was being honest? Who was lying? Who could say what was false and what was true?

This was the chaotic context in which Matthew wrote his gospel around A.D. 80 or 85. Matthew is retelling the stories of Jesus in an attempt to proclaim truth amidst competing claims and help people gain clarity amidst the chaos. Some of this chaos was already present when Jesus began his ministry around A.D. 30. Jesus himself was caught between conflicting claims and competing forces. And in the midst of such chaos he was tempted to veer off course.

So in a context of chaotic forces, Jesus finds himself in *conflict*. Specifically, he’s in conflict with the *devil*. Let me set the scene for you: Jesus is sky high! He’s just been baptized, God has spoken to him, and he has vocational clarity. In the language of today, he’s feeling real good about himself. But God knows that Jesus is not quiteready for ministry, so God sends Jesus into the wilderness, for a time of prayer and fasting and solitude. That’s when the devil shows up. And where there seemed to be clarity, there’s confusion.

That’s what the devil does: he sews confusion. He says things that aren’t true. He gets us confused about what *is* true. I mean, he just makes stuff up. In Greek the word for the devil translates literally as “the slanderer.” The devil is one who slanders us, and slanders others. He makes up lies and whispers them in our ears. Christian psychiatrist Scott Peck calls him “the father of lies.” The devil might unduly praise us or unjustly insult us with such lies. In Jesus case, the lies tempt Jesus to doubt who he really is. The devil begins the first two temptations by saying, “*If* you are the Son of God…” He’s tempting Jesus to doubt his calling. Maybe he’s even tempting Jesus to doubt the reality of God. Perhaps that voice at Jesus’ baptism that said, “This is my Son,” was just some kind of hallucination. The devil seems to be saying, “If you, Jesus, haven’t been called to serve God, maybe all these gifts you’ve been given are designed for you to serve *yourself*; to *glorify* yourself. You can turn stones into bread and feed *millions* of people, and folks will turn you into a hero. You can jump off the Temple and be borne-up on angels’ wings and it would be a great PR stunt. It would be *HUGE*. And then, with all the attention that you’ve grabbed, you can seize political power and rule the world.”

This is all about self-glory. Scripture tells us to give God the glory, but it’s tempting to give *yourself* the glory. Look how wonderful *I* am! It’s called pride. It’s called hubris. Sometimes it’s called narcissism. And it is the deadliest of the seven deadly sins.

Here’s the thing: Jesus *really was* tempted. A part of him *really wanted* to abandon his call and glorify himself. That’s what it means to be tempted: part of you really wants to do something that your better nature tells you *not* to do. Even St. Paul struggled with this. Check out the 7th chapter of Romans. To be tempted is part of the human condition. And Jesus was fully human. He was like us in every way, except that he did not sin. He was *tempted* to sin, but he didn’t follow through. He listened to the devil’s lies, but in the final analysis he didn’t act upon them. He used his God-given freedom to resist. He used the grace within him as a resource that powered him toward truth and light and love.

Jesus didn’t believe the lies of the slanderer; and we don’t have to either. In our context we are also conflicted as we’re drawn this way and that by contradictory claims. But we can stay the course because, like Jesus, we are bound-up in a *covenant*. And here are the terms of that covenant: God promises to be with us always. God promises to help us power through all difficulties. All we have to do is to *trust* those promises and step-out in faith as if those promises are true. Because they are.

I don’t know about you all, but I’ve had plenty of times when people have been whispering lies in my ears; tempting me to doubt myself and to doubt our God. As a child I was told repeatedly, “Don’t count your chickens before they hatch.” That’s a *horrible* thing to say to a little kid. What you’re saying is, “Don’t dream. Don’t hope. Don’t have great expectations for the future, because life is essentially cruel and those dreams are never going to come to fruition.” *That’s a lie!*  If NASA scientists had believed that, we never would’ve made it to the moon. If medical researchers had believed that, we never would’ve come up with penicillin, and the polio vaccine, and other miracle drugs. If our nearly landless forbearers had believed that, they wouldn’t have crossed the Ohio from Kentucky and settled in Indiana where they could hold title to their own land. And if the followers of Barton W. Stone had believed that, they wouldn’t have built new churches on the Indiana frontier, dedicated to the proposition that all who follow Jesus are one Body of Christ; that Christian unity is our polar star.

“Don’t count your chickens before they hatch.” “You’ll never amount to much.” “You’re stupid.” “You’re weak.” “You have no future.” Some of us have been told these lies. And God says, “They’re not true.”

One reason why we have a drug epidemic in this nation is because people are believing these lies and losing all hope. And when you lose all hope – when you fall into despair – you do crazy things: like get drunk, or get high, or shoot people. But we in the Church, we have a story to tell people who are lost in despair. We follow One who contested with the devil and his lies and emerged victorious. We follow One who said, “With God, all things are possible.” We follow One of whom Paul said, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” Jesus, you see, gives us the strength to resist the forces that lie to us; the forces that threaten to undo us. There are people sitting here today, including me, who can tell you stories about how Jesus has given us that freedom to resist the devil’s lies, and the strength to follow the truth. I mean, I’ve walked down that dark road of doubt and despair. But one day Jesus came to me and said, “Doubt no more. Fear not. I am with you, always!”

The grace that was deep in the heart of Jesus gave birth to trust. And trust is the key here. It was Jesus’ profound trust in God that got him through those difficult days in the wilderness. He knew that he was not alone. He knew that God was real. He knew that he was called to follow God, to serve God, no matter where the road might lead. And he knew that with God, no obstacle on that road would be too great for him to surmount.

Well, that same grace is deep in *your* heart. That same trust is at the core of *your* being. No obstacle is too great for *you* to surmount either. No obstacle is too great for *us* to surmount. Because God has made a covenant with us. God has promised to be with us. We can do all things in the One who strengthens us. Brothers and sisters, that’s the message that we need to hear, and we need to share. As we make our Lenten journey, as we talk with our neighbors and co-workers, and as we ponder the future of our journey as a congregation, that’s the message that we need to hear and share. God’s grace gives us incredible strength to do whatever we have to do. In the power of the Holy Spirit we can resist the slanderer and his lies, for we know that our Redeemer liveth. Thanks be to God. Amen.