

We've just begun a series of confirmation classes, preparing our eager candidates to deepen their understanding of the vows undertaken at baptism. In this sacred and holy rite, we are asked if we, "...renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God." When we agree to renounce him, what or who are we actually referring to? Where do we stand when we are confronted with the issue of Satan? Does he actually exist or is it simply language that represents evil in its various forms and manifestations? If we are going to wrestle with these Baptismal vows we might want to clear that up for ourselves, and today's Old Testament lesson brings Satan right to the foreground for us to face.

The book of Job is intriguing. In the man called Job we find an almost perfect servant of God. Blameless and upright, who feared God and turned away from evil. It would be an understatement to say that Job gets the short end of the stick throughout this book. And why? Far removed from Job's scope of comprehension, a dialogue is taking place between God and Satan. This is the second meeting in the heavenly realm between the Almighty and the adversary, and it is an almost exact restatement of the first. "Where have you come from?" God asks Satan, as if He doesn't know! Just one chapter earlier, God accepted Satan's challenge, test, gentleman's bet to see if His poster-child, Job, would live up to his reputation. Satan offers the same flippant reply from before: "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." But this is a lie! He wasn't simply wandering aimlessly, twiddling his thumbs for something to do. Satan was given permission to do what Satan does best; to fracture, frustrate, and infuriate God's creation until we lose all hope in our Maker. Job's experienced his first string of "bad-luck" and unbeknownst to him, he's about to get another dose. [pause]

What is going on in this scene? If Job, blameless and upright, God fearing and steadfast, is allowed to have the clutches of Satan's claws dug deep into his faithful flesh, what hope do we hold? If even Job's commitment to God proves powerless to protect him, what chance do *we* have? We, who in comparison to Job, don't even hold a candle in our faith. He is Michael Phelps receiving his 14<sup>th</sup> Olympic gold medal and we haven't even taken our floaties off yet. It's unfair. Evil is unfair. Suffering is unfair. Satan is unfair.

Or so it seems. Is Job really all that great? At the end of this passage we read that Job did not sin with his lips, or more literally Job did not speak or utter a word of anger toward God. By the end of the first chapter, after Job suffered a terrible loss of family, we read, "In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong." Now, with two calamities under his belt Job is tight-lipped, but we have to assume that in his heart Job is starting to have doubts. He's gone from steadfast to silent, and if we read further, he continues his trek by cursing the day he was born, loathing his life, complaining bitterly. It would seem that Satan has pushed Job beyond his limits. As Job begs for an explanation, God speaks. Not to account for the misfortune Job has endured, but to remind Job who he's talking to! "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" God asks. The final dialogue is poetic, powerful, awe inspiring, and Job is both humbled and satisfied, not because God gave him the answers he wanted, but because he is in the presence of the Almighty! He now knows first-hand the assurance of our creator!

We really are Jobs ourselves. On our good days God is our abundant provider, One who can do no wrong and we give thanks and praise for all the goodness and loving kindness with which He has blessed us. Our trust in Him is great...we've taken our floaties off to swim with a little more confidence. As is bound to happen given enough time we reach *our* first "test" as well. Like Job, we can brush off the first struggle, remembering the storehouse of providence from God that has prepared us to weather this one storm of misfortune. Two tests and we too remain silent, silent in our displeasure with God, silent while feeling betrayed, but something has changed. The heart, not the physical one, but our processing

center for emotions starts to feel the work- load increase and responds in turn, “Dude! What’s going on?” and just as quickly as the words surface to our mouths we swallow them back down. Job is swallowing these same words, not uttering a sin with his lips. He has successfully bridled that fiery tongue.

How many tests does it take to get to the Tootsie Roll center of doubt?

In the Gospel reading for today we read some fairly difficult teachings from Jesus. No sugar-coating around it, Jesus tells us that divorce is equivalent to adultery. Similar to last week’s reading where we would do better to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven with one eye plucked out and one foot and hand lopped off, than to burn in the unquenchable fires of Hell. What are we to do? Maybe sinning with our lips isn’t looking so bad after all! How are we supposed to measure up compared to Job who looks like the perfect servant of God while we still have an incredible load to bear? I mean, if God is going to make it this difficult, why not just throw in the towel, right!?! (Satan is starting to smile.)

It would seem upon deeper reading that Satan’s role in the world is not really to heap endless suffering upon God’s beautiful creation, but something more sinister. At the core of Satan’s desire is to plant the tiniest seeds of doubt within our hearts, so small in fact that we have almost no chance of recognizing them for what they are, and then to let us water those seeds with our tears. Tears of pain. Tears of starvation. Tears of violence. This is evil...for in crafting this deceit in such a way we are almost helpless to prevent the thought that *we* have chosen this for ourselves. It would be so much simpler if Satan showed himself like we picture him, out in the open, offering outrageous avenues for sin and temptation. The red skin, red horns and red tail would just about match the red stop light, the code red, the red alert that should go off in our heads saying, “This is Satan! Time to put up our shields!” But those little seeds of doubt in our hearts, too small for us to see Satan in them, convince us that we chose this path. We are the ones who choose not to lift a hand to help. We are the ones who put in 70-hour work weeks without time to spend on our spouse. We are the ones who will stand up to protect the Messiah from the cross and say, “Never Lord! This shall never happen to you!”

...“Get behind me, Satan.” [LONG pause]

“The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn’t exist.” Kevin Spacey delivers this line in the 1995 movie *The Usual Suspects*. “The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn’t exist.” We run the risk of being labeled simple, silly, stupid or worse if we mention the Devil in polite company. Either our logical brain doesn’t allow the concept to be rational or reasonable, or we are simply too sophisticated in a modern world to allow any substance to the thought of the demonic. Because what might that look like? Maybe that scene from *Constantine*, where Keanu Reeves lights up a darkened city block only to reveal a swarm of demons on every side? Well, ok then, if that’s the way it is, I guess I can just rest comfortably knowing that the Devil made me do it, so I’m off the hook. *I’m* not responsible for evil actions so there’s no need for guilt right? (Satan is smiling even bigger now.) True, we do make choices for ourselves; we wrestle with outside influences, temptations and corruptions, and when we do fall short while attempting to live up to being creatures formed in the image of God...we stop...turn around...and present ourselves to God...Who receives us despite what we have done, and what we have left undone.

Job is not the only one who hits stumbling blocks. We all do. At times it seems like it’s just too much to handle. Sometimes unsure of the causes, we become paralyzed in our response. “Did I bring this on myself? Could I have done something differently to avoid this? Is God testing me?” The answers are never clear. But it’s at these moments, some of our weakest, most vulnerable moments, when we realize that we have been doing laps in the deep end. No floaties, no shallow end, now we are really making waves in our faith. To keep our heads above water when the storm starts to surge, this is progress.

Darkness gives way to light, clouds dissipate, and the sun on the horizon radiates brilliant and warm as it climbs through the heavens. Daily we are waking up to the truth that we walk this path forever in the company of Christ. We see before us an oceanic expanse, the vastness of God's unending love for us. And we can do so only through hope. Hope! A glorious gift from our good and gracious God, hand-delivered by His only Son, our Lord, our savior Jesus Christ, who knows first-hand the trials we endure.