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SATAN AND THE THREE P'S

Let me begin by asking you a question: How many of you believe in the devil?

- No wait. That's the wrong question.
- How many of you believe there is a devil?

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Many of you may remember comedian Flip Wilson and his popular character, Geraldine Brown.

- Geraldine was a very attractive and voluptuous woman with a boy friend called "Killer".
- In spite of her devotion to Killer, Geraldine had a habit of flirting with other men.
- And whenever she slipped in her faithfulness to her boyfriend, Geraldine would always excuse herself by claiming, "The devil made me do it."

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I think one of the reasons this character became so popular is because she spoke a truth that we all know and understand:

- that to be human is to be tempted.
- It doesn't have to be bread, or power, or safety.
- Those just happens to be the ones in this gospel reading.

The Bible, though, is filled with temptations and testing from beginning to end.

- And while the temptation of JESUS is perhaps the most familiar one, the stories of Adam and Eve, or King David and Bathsheba, or Judas Iscariot, or Ananias and Sapphira, remind us that temptation is all around us and in all of our lives.
- Temptation comes in many forms but it always has the same goal.
- Temptation is not so much a call toward something—usually understood as doing something you shouldn't do—but rather a call away from something:
  - namely, our relationship with GOD and the identity we have in and through that relationship.

Bread, or power, or safety.

- But it could just as easily have been youth, or beauty, or wealth.
- Or confidence, or fame, or security.
- It's no surprise that when JESUS taught us how to pray, He encouraged us to include a request for protection from temptation.

JESUS knew what temptation was, for HE had been led by the HOLY SPIRIT to go where temptation was.

- (By the way, that is not an example that JESUS would want us to follow.)

JESUS knew that temptation can be persistent and powerful.

- JESUS knew its strength and its danger.
- And HE knew that the temptations of Satan were designed to undermine and weaken His relationship with the FATHER,
  - and His sense of who HE was—in a sense, a kind of identity theft.
  - And these temptations came more broadly, in terms of three P's – Personal Need, Power, and Pride.

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First, personal need.

*"If YOU are the SON OF GOD, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."*

- This temptation was designed to move JESUS away from His trust in GOD's provision, and to choose to act to meet His physical needs on His own.
- HE was hungry and that hunger made HIM vulnerable to the devil's temptation.
- That's when Satan is most likely to act—when we are feeling weak and vulnerable.

- JESUS was at the end of more than five weeks of fasting.
- And Satan recognized that JESUS had the power to act to meet His personal need for food.

Perhaps you've known hunger and have been tempted to act to address that hunger, even when you know that, at the right time, GOD will provide.

- However, that hunger doesn't necessarily need to be for food.
  - It could be a hunger for physical contact,
  - or relief from pain in the body,
  - or to achieve the outward appearance the world seems to value,
  - or to have your own time to relax and recreate,
  - or help to feel differently, at least for a while.

It is when we are focused on our personal needs, that the devil will come and say, "If you give into the desire to address this hunger, you will feel better and stronger and more in control.

- Yet, too often, when we give into the temptation, we find ourselves feeling guilty and shameful and underserving of GOD's love.

JESUS had grown up among the poor and HE knew what life was like for them.

- HE knew that there were many who had little to eat.
- He knew that there were those who needed even the most basic necessities of life.
  - Certainly, giving them what they needed would have won JESUS many followers:
    - plenty of food;
    - better conditions for living;
    - abundance instead of poverty.
  - How many of us would love to have such a SAVIOR?
  - How many of us would gladly worship a GOD who would give us all that we needed in our lives?

Some years ago, I took the youth group from the church I was serving to Dallas, TX to attend the ELCA National Youth Gathering.

- Each morning, we would walk from our hotel to the arena where we would hear presentations and speakers, and participate in activities about life and faith.
- On the way, though, we would occasionally be stopped by someone who wanted money for a meal.
  - We had been told not to give them money, but it was an awkward situation for all of us who followed the ONE who told us to care for the poor and the hungry.

One morning, we were approached by a man who asked, "You're CHRISTIANS, aren't you?"

- When we replied in the affirmative, he stepped forward and faced me and said, "Well, if you're CHRISTIANS, then you'll give me some money for breakfast."
  - How do you respond to such a challenge?
  - Especially when the eyes of a group of impressionable young CHRISTIANS are watching you?
    - Was this an offer to follow CHRIST, or a temptation to serve my own need to be seen in a positive light?

I did offer to help that man with a meal.

- But since he had put in terms of my relationship with JESUS, I decided to invite JESUS into my response.
- I told the man that I would take him to a nearby restaurant and buy him breakfast.
  - But while we ate, I told him I was going to tell him about JESUS.
    - Suddenly, he didn't seem too happy to be in the company of CHRISTIANS, so he turned and walked away.

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Too often we worry about the needs of the flesh so much, that we close our eyes to heavenly bread which GOD offers to us.

- Certainly, our physical needs are important,
    - but when we allow them to become more important than the GOD who loves us and promises to give us what we need, rather than what we want, we risk damaging that relationship that can truly give us life.
    - When we do that, we've fallen for Satan's first P.
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The second P is the temptation of power.

*"If YOU will worship me, all the kingdoms of the world will be YOURS."*

- All the world, and you only need turn your back on GOD.
- Before I took my first call to be a parish pastor, I served as a chaplain on the adolescent unit of a psychiatric hospital in Denver.
- Many of the teenagers on that unit had dabbled in varying degrees with black magic and the worship of Satan.
  - As I spent time talking with them about this choice, they would tell me about the abusive situations in which they lived.
    - Not just physical abuse, but also mental and emotional abuse.
  - Living in such environments where they had no power over what was happening to them, they looked for a place that might give them immediate help.
    - Many came to believe that Satan would grant them the power to fly, to become invisible, to destroy the lives of others if only they did what Satan wanted.
    - In some cases, they concluded that what was required of them was to take the life of another.
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The temptation of power can lead us toward all kinds of abuses:

- physical and emotional abuse, sexual harassment, intimidation and ridicule of others, rape, misappropriation of funds, and overspending.
  - We give into this temptation when we participate in jokes and gossip at the expense of the privacy and dignity of others;
  - when we take advantage of people and situations,
  - when we manipulate others for our benefit, whether they be family, friends, or strangers,
  - when we label others or make assumptions about others based on just characteristic or aspect, we have given into the second of Satan's P's.
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The third P is that of the pride.

*"If YOU are the SON OF GOD, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'HE will command His angels concerning YOU, to protect YOU.'"*

This is the temptation to put our will ahead of GOD's, thinking that we know better than GOD,

- or to make GOD prove that GOD loves us and will act on our behalf, according to what we want for ourselves.
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Perhaps you've heard the story of the Christian who was caught in a flood.

- Though his house was surrounded by water, he refused to leave.
  - "GOD will save me," he said.
- A boat came by, but he declined to get in.
  - "GOD will save me."
- The water rose, and a second boat came; again he rejected the help.
  - "GOD will save me."
- Now the waters rose so that he had to climb onto the roof of his house.

- A helicopter came and lowered a rope ladder, but he waved them off.
  - “GOD will save me.”
- The man was washed from his house and drowned.
  - Arriving before the throne of the ALMIGHTY he asked, “GOD, why didn’t you save me?”
    - GOD replied, “I sent you two boats and a helicopter. What more did you want?”

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We may chuckle at this story, but we really are not unlike that man.

- We often find our own ways to test GOD.
  - “GOD, if you help me out of this situation, I promise never to do it again.”
  - “GOD, if you help me get ahead, I promise to spend more time in church.”
  - “GOD, if you give me more money, I’ll share more of it with others.
  - “GOD, if you make me well, I’ll rededicate my life to YOU.”
    - We become so wrapped up in how we think GOD should act, that we miss the help and blessings that GOD really sends.

The problem is that we let our pride get in the way.

- We tell ourselves that we deserve more or better or different than what GOD has chosen to give,
- that we know better what we need and expect that GOD will provide it.

Sadly, we fail to trust that our GOD loves us so much that God promises to come and be present with us in the midst of our troubles,

- and that often these challenges are can what help us to grow in our relationship with GOD.
  - GOD doesn’t promise to grant us the life we want, given to us on our terms.
  - Instead, GOD comes to us, beginning in baptism, and tells us, “I am here. You are mine. I have not forgotten you. The cross is MY reminder that you are loved and that you already have all that you need.”

Through baptism, we actually become much more than what we want to be.

- We become one of GOD’s claimed and adopted children, in spite of our own agendas.
- We become part of GOD’s family, welcomed to live in the richness and joy of GOD’s kingdom.
- We become people who are freed from the expectations of the world, and released to become all that GOD wants us to be.

We may think we know best, but that is just Satan talking.

- Setting the agenda for ourselves and for GOD is simply giving into Satan and his P’s.
  - Choosing instead to speak the words of scripture, to say to the devil, “*Worship the LORD your GOD and serve only HIM*” is the way that we defeat Satan’s plans and overthrow his temptations.
  - Fixing our eyes on the cross so that we can clearly see GOD’s empowering love and provision for us and for all the world, is the way that we overcome the all the temptations of the devil.