

The Devil Made Me Do It

“Survival hint #1 - Stay out of there. Don’t go. Stay home and read a good book...The Great...Desert is an awful place. People get hurt, get sick, get lost out there. Even if you survive, which is not certain, you will have a miserable time. The desert is for movies and God-intoxicated mystics, not for family recreation.”

Edward Abbey

“Long ago there lived a young man in an erudite family. Yet, he did not lead a life of leisure, but instead decided to become an ascetic. So, he built a hermitage on the bank of the river Ganga in the Himalayas and lived there.

One day, a doe drank water in the place where the ascetic had just taken a bath. No sooner had she drunk the water she conceived the ascetic’s baby. In course of time, the doe delivered a male baby, who was called Isisanga.

The sage brought him up with fatherly affection and he taught him spiritual practices. Soon he proved his excellence in meditation and other spiritual pursuits.

Realizing his potential, the sage cautioned him, “In this Himalayan region the women are as fair as flowers but they may be devastating if you fall in their powers. After imparting these instructions the ascetic died. Isisanga became an ardent ascetic and perfected the most arduous penance. Frightened by the practices of the young lad, Sakka sent the most gorgeous heavenly nymph to entice him. Her name was Alambusa. She pleaded exemption from carrying out such an order as she considered it to be a heinous act. Yet, insisted by her lord, she descended the earth to charm and seduce Isisanga. She made a sudden appearance before him when he was walking to

the river to have his holy bath. Dazzled at such a heavenly beauty and allured by her elegance he forgot everything. The young ascetic, unmindful of all his vows, plunged into her embrace.

When the ascetic could arouse from her embrace, three years had elapsed; and all his spiritual achievements had vanished. Thus, realizing his irreparable losses he started wailing. The kind nymph then revealed her mission with an apology and shared his mourning. The ascetic bore no malice against her and pardoned her. After the conclusion of her mission, she boarded the golden chariot and flew back to her heavenly abode. When congratulated and commended by Sakka, she was not pleased to the surprise of the lord of the devas. Further, when Sakka offered her to ask for any blessing she said, if thou desire any blessing to bestow, then never ask me to make any saint violate his vow.”

video

They are stories as old as time and as contemporary as us. We find it told in the tales of nearly every culture, religious tradition, and philosophy in the history of humanity. Like the Buddhist tale you just heard all the way through to the Flip Wilson appearance on the iconic Ed Sullivan show, each tells us that from the very beginning, there has been an essence in the universe that wants to steer us in the wrong direction. It has been referred to as the opposing force or as the opposite of God. It has been personified and called Sakka in Buddhist tradition, the trickster in many Native American tales. In Judeo/Islamic/Christian tradition it has been known as Satan, Beelzebul, the devil, or the darkness. But no matter what name it has been given, virtually every religion and philosophy has acknowledged it and attempted to address it.

In our own tradition, the tales of temptation by the other begin right after God creates the universe. In fact, the first four stories in the Bible after creation are about this struggle. Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the tower of Babel, and the flood story we heard about in our first reading, are all tales about the difficult choices each of us must face in life because of an evil force. And how well do we handle those temptations? Well, according to the Buddhist story you just heard, as well as Flip Wilson, and those four opening stories in the Bible, we stink at it. In all of those accounts, the people give in to the temptation they encounter. And in the case of the story that concludes in our first reading today, it is not just an individual or a group of people that fall, but it is the entire population of the world, save one family.

That is why the conclusion to today's story of the flood is so astonishingly improbable. All we have heard in the Biblical account to this point is that every generation has failed by succumbing to evil. God creates the world by bringing order to chaos. God declares that the creation is "good" seven times. But thereafter, humanity plunges this ordered creation back into violence and chaos by responding to another spiritual power. In effect, humanity un-creates what God has made. But even though this is the only experience God has had of humanity, even though the people continually give in to each temptation, God promises to never destroy the earth by flood again. It is called a Covenant, but in reality it is not a covenant at all. A covenant in ancient Mesopotamia was a reciprocal arrangement between two parties that would benefit each of them. If you do this for us, then we'll do that for you. But what Yahweh promises today is unique in the history of covenants. It is all one sided. No matter how often we continue to respond to the evil forces of the universe, God says "never again."

In fact, Yahweh says it five times today. It is a unilateral pledge, made not just to Noah, not just to Israel, but to all the people, and all future generations. In fact, God makes this promise not just with humanity but to “all life on earth” and “all living creatures of all kind.” Then, God makes the promise to the earth itself. In effect, God tells us that even though we continue to un-create what God has done, God will not take part in the destruction.

This is a critical part of our religious tradition that is so frequently missed. From the beginning, God’s links Godself intimately with all of us and all of creation. And right after that, we read in Genesis that we are to be images of that God. The message is clear. We are to link ourselves with all creation too. The story of the flood reminds of this once again. The only way we are saved is when all of us are saved together, humans, animals, and all of the earth. God’s covenant with the earth must lead us to our covenant with the earth and with each other. Rather than falling to temptation from evil which creates chaos and un-creates, God calls us to be co-creators. This is the first lesson on our Lenten journey. God makes it clear that all life is connected and as images of God it is our primary responsibility to say “never again”, never again can we allow our actions as humans to un-create God’s earth.

But how in the world, we rightly ask, can we do this? Every example we have from our own sacred text, the sacred texts of other traditions, right down through all of our own cultural experiences as parodied so well by Flip Wilson, suggest to us that it is impossible for human beings to do anything but create chaos out of God’s order.

All of those examples, that is, until today’s Gospel. For the first time, we hear the story of a human who overcomes the spiritual forces of wickedness in the world. Jesus

becomes the image of God all of us are called to be, linking himself with the created order he experiences in his 40 days in the desert. Out there in the chaotic, untamed desert, the place of untold danger, surrounded by wild beasts, as we hear in the Gospel, Jesus brings a sense of peacefulness and tranquility.

Some of us are uncomfortable with the theological notion of an anthropomorphized image of evil existing in our world. But that is what nearly all of our ancient and contemporary traditions describe. And the evil faced in all of these stories, including the Satanic force faced by Jesus in the desert is obviously not of human construct. It is not from the military/industrial complex. Later, he will face human evil, but today it is definitely a spiritual force, a force that has apparently overwhelmed humans from the dawn of time. Jesus' journey, as the post-communion prayer we say on Creation Sunday puts it, is crooked, winding, lonesome, and dangerous, all due to an outside evil force.

What Jesus manages to do in the midst of that danger is just what God does in our first reading from Genesis. They both bring harmony to a broken world. God brings serenity to the planet by ending the flooding and Jesus lives amidst the wild beasts, creating harmonious relationships between himself and all of them. Here is the first example in our sacred text of someone actually living into the ancient covenant with Yahweh. Jesus contributes to the effort to co-create the rainbow and bring about the kingdom of God, a place where all of us can live in beauty with the natural world.

How does he do it? Remember that in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is just a regular man before this moment. What allows this normal guy who finds Satan in his desert experience, to avoid the temptation, when every story we have about human

nature tells us we can't? Two things stand out for me. First, Jesus totally disregards the words with which I began, the sage advice given us by our former neighbor, the desert crank, Ed Abbey. He doesn't avoid the desert, but he plunges in for 40 days, even though he knows of Satan's presence there. He takes on the hunger, the thirst, and all the travails. Then Jesus confronts Satan head on. He is not willing to allow the forces that have prevented the kingdom of God from materializing, to continue unabated. He confronts the disorder and danger directly. We saw evidence that this will be Jesus' approach throughout his ministry in our Gospel a few weeks ago. In his first public act in Mark's Gospel, he exorcises a demon (a devil) from a man. By eliminating the evil, he brings order back to this man who full of chaos. Today, he does the same thing for the entire desert. Saturated with the power of the Spirit, Jesus is ready to take on all of those evil forces and reverse them, harmonizing relationships throughout the world.

This is the calling that we receive from God in the first lesson and from Jesus in the Gospel. We must take on the evil forces head on. We need to plunge ourselves into the desert and confront Satan in our lives. That is what Lent is all about. And what God and Jesus show us is that if we have the courage to do that, we will make a great discovery. The chaos and evil in the world dissipates when we connect ourselves to creation. And once those spiritual forces have been eliminated, the desert and all the world comes back to order. Chaos is gone and the the kingdom of God, the harmony that God wants for all the universe, returns. Of course our desert Lenten journey is also going to be crooked, winding, lonesome, and dangerous. There is nothing to suggest that our Lenten trek is not going to be just as hazardous as Jesus'. In fact, there is everything to indicate the opposite, that our world is so much more complicated and

dangerous and full of evil than it ever has been before. But if we confront it head on, we are going to be led to the most amazing view, a view of God's rainbow and a world where chaos has been eliminated.

Like Jesus, like the stripped down church in which we sit today, we need not take any stuff on this journey into the dangers of Lent. Stuff, in fact, will get in the way. But what we do need with us are these lessons from today. First, we remember God's ecological pledge to all of the earth. We remember that God calls us to avoid the temptation that causes chaos and violence to the earth and un-creates God's world. Instead, our own pledge must be to co-create with God, including a commitment not just to each other, but to all of God's creation.

Finally, we, like Jesus, must be fearless in standing up against the difficulties and chaos in our lives and that saturate our world. We need to enter our Lenten journey with no trepidation, even though we know it is going to be crooked, winding, lonesome, and dangerous...because we know it is going to take us to the most amazing view ever.

Are you ready?

Climb every mountain... Amen.