

Genesis 3:8–15

When is the last time you heard a sermon about the devil in an Episcopal church?

Don't be scared, I promise there won't be any fire and brimstone. But the devil is worth talking about. Satan has fired our imaginations and superstitions for millennia.

What we believe about the prince of lies is all over the map. In some churches, you might hear as much about the devil as you would hear about God, with the world envisioned as a no-man's-land in the ongoing war between God and Satan, angels and demons. In other churches, like the Episcopal Church, many don't believe in the devil at all. He isn't mentioned in the creeds, after all. Across traditions there are many different images of the devil, from the serpent in Genesis to the dragon of the Revelation to John, to the guy with horns and hooves, a pointed tail and a pitch fork.

The word "devil" appears almost exclusively in the New Testament, with just one reference in the Apocrypha, in the Book of Wisdom.

The Old Testament uses different images. In the story of the fall, the tempter is the serpent. Scholars argue about whether the serpent in the garden is supposed to represent Satan or not. There is nothing in the story to suggest that it is anything other than a snake, so many scholars believe that the story was first used as an epistemology, an explanation of an observed truth, a just-so story to explain why snakes have no legs. Snakes have no legs because God cursed the ur-serpent to crawl and eat dust.

Maybe that is why the story was written, but the serpent has been used as an image of Satan for a very, very long time, well back into Hebrew Testament days. But who is this Satan the snake is supposed to represent?

The word "satan" just means one who opposes. In the ancient middle east, the satan was a court official who ferreted out wrongdoing or deceit. We might think of the satan as a kind of prosecuting attorney, but one who was free to entrap and entice and lead into wrongdoing. His job was not just to prosecute criminals, but to expose any who might even be tempted into crime or treason.

We get a little flavor of that in the frame narrative from the book of Job, in which God and Satan are settling a friendly bet about whether Job is really good. It was written much later than the rest of Job, and it undermines the whole point the more ancient writer was trying to make, but it still gives us some insight into the role of the satan in the heavenly court.

Satan, then, at least to the Hebrew people, was not exactly an opponent of God, but a part of God's own justice system. Not the source of evil, but the exposer of evil tasked with revealing the evil that lies in the human heart. If you'll forgive the phrase, Satan's heavenly role is to be the "devil's advocate," our accuser.

As the Jewish people rubbed up against the Canaanites, Assyrians, and Babylonians, they heard about different gods, gods like Baal-zebul or later Baal-zebul and later still Beelzebul. These foreign deities, naturally enough, were turned into the demons of popular ancient Judaism. Later, the Hebrews encountered the Persians, and Zoroastrianism. Zarathustra spoke of a dualistic cosmos of nearly equal and opposed forces of good and evil, for which the material world was a battle ground. Later still the Greeks introduced Hades. In medieval times, a

confused church combined Jesus' mention of Satan falling from heaven like lightning with the Prophet Isaiah's taunting of the King of Babylon as a fallen morning star.

So many pictures, and images, and traditions. So much confusion. So much energy spent looking for someone else to blame. And none of it matters.

I'm willing to believe that there are "spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God." There are times when I wonder if they are loose in the world as we speak. But they don't worry me in any sort of ultimate way. From the very beginning of things, God made them crawl on their belly and eat dust. The strong man has been bound. They may strike at our heels, but their head was crushed when Eve's daughter said, "May it be with me as you have said."

I'm more concerned with the "evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God." They are alive and well, powers and principalities, greed, racism, tribalism, all the things that oppress our brothers and sisters and mothers. These are things we can see and touch and fight against with every breath.

I'm more concerned with "the sinful desires that draw me from the love of God." I know them all too well, all of us do. Pride, sloth, lust, consumption...They are insidious, deceitful, and powerful and we fall to them over and over. And their effect is devastating.

"They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze ..." It's one of my favorite images of God. How else might that story have ended? We'll never know, not in this world at least.

When I was about 5 my mother had a flower pot shaped and painted like a robin. It had been given to her by someone she looked up to at an important time in her life. It was precious to her and I was not to touch it.

You know what happened of course. When I broke it, I gathered the pieces and hid with them behind the couch. I was so scared. I couldn't face my mother. She would be sad, she would be disappointed in me, and she would be angry. When I heard the sound of her walking in the living room that evening...

We've all had that feeling. Sin turns love into fear and joy into shame. We long for the Lord, we wait for the Lord, and when he comes we hide. And it happens to all of us. We have sinned through our own fault, in thought and word and deed. Satan has us dead to rights.

But we do not stand alone before our accuser. We have an Advocate too, the Holy Spirit who speaks to the Father on our behalf. Is it any wonder Jesus was so upset that his opponents confused the accuser and advocate?

Not only do we have support, our judge is not impartial. He came to walk with us in the garden again to make us his sisters and brothers and mothers.

There's a reason we don't hear about Satan much. He no longer matters. His head was crushed when Eve's offspring said, "May it be with me as you have said." Pierced feet have trodden on the serpent's head, the devil's house has been plundered, and we are free to continue tilling this garden without shame or fear until it bears fruit again.