



SERMONS THAT WORK

Lent 1
Year C

Jesus, Daniel, and Johnny

[RCL]: Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

Humanity vs. the Devil. It's a tale as old as time. You might know one such story that starts like this:

"It's a story they tell in the border country, where Massachusetts joins Vermont and New Hampshire.

"Yes, Dan'l Webster's dead—or, at least, they buried him. But every time there's a thunderstorm around Marshfield, [Massachusetts,] they say you can hear his rolling voice in the hollows of the sky. And they say that if you go to his grave and speak loud and clear, 'Dan'l Webster—Dan'l Webster!' the ground'll begin to shiver and the trees begin to shake. And after a while you'll hear a deep voice saying, 'Neighbor, how stands the Union?'"

So begins a story they tell in New England: *The Devil and Daniel Webster*, written by Stephen Vincent Benét. The story is one of a poor New Hampshire farmer, Mr. Stone, who, after years of barren land and bad luck, remarks, "It's enough to make a man want to sell his soul to the devil!"

Soon thereafter, the farmer meets a stranger named Mr. Scratch, also known as the devil himself, who makes such a deal with him. Long story short, the devil soon comes to get his due, and Mr. Stone calls upon Daniel Webster, famous orator and politician, to defend him.

Of course, as the story goes, Daniel Webster defends Mr. Stone and with his quick wit and oratory power, saves Mr. Stone's soul.

Further South, there's another story: "The Devil went down to Georgia, he was lookin' for a soul to steal. He was in a bind 'cause he was way behind, and he was willin' to make a deal."

Charlie Daniels' song, *The Devil Went Down to Georgia*, tells the tale of Johnny, who outplays the devil on the fiddle and wins the devil's golden instrument.

Our literature and music are all full of these stories. It's odd — in a world where it's perfectly acceptable to have your doubts about the devil as a concrete being, our culture and collective memory still retain these stories. They hold on to what is most important about the concept of evil: it exists. The world is not perfect. Evil wants our souls — our very identities. These stories recognize that evil tempts us to go back on everything, to abandon who we are, to betray all that we love, usually to gain something or save ourselves.

That is part of what is broken about us. We even *love* imperfectly — we are sometimes willing to sell our souls even for “good” reasons. Often, we are willing to argue that seemingly positive ends justify destructive means. We have a tendency to go back on our principles — especially in extreme situations.

You know, like not having eaten for forty days. Or living in divided times.

“How stands the Union,” by the way, neighbor?

In the Gospel story today, Jesus contends with the devil, and we're tempted to think that this tale is just like all the others — one where someone contends with Satan and defeats him.

There are similarities, after all. Again, someone is offered everything from what he immediately needs (food) to world domination and great power, in exchange for Jesus' going back on everything he is. In an act of desperation, the devil even offers Jesus a chance to put the doubters to rest once and for all by defying gravity in front of scores of worshipers at the temple in Jerusalem. If the ends really do justify the means, you could even say that the devil gave him an opportunity.

“C'mon, Jesus,” the devil whispers. “You can do this the hard way, or you can do it the easy way. You don't have to starve out here. You don't have to contend with the religious authorities or the Roman empire. They can certainly kill you, and if you anger them enough, they will. And if they kill you, what? You'll be just another dead Jewish rebel.”

I doubt the devil is the only one who hinted at this to Jesus.

Jesus, of course, famously resists the devil's temptations, quotes the Scriptures right back to him, and gets rid of him. Jesus refuses to sell his soul, metaphorically speaking, and unlike other characters, he doesn't even have to trick or outperform the devil.

It's tempting to celebrate Jesus' victory over temptation here as an end in itself, wishing that we could resist evil as well as Jesus did. We are tempted to think this story is like all the other stories — one to emulate.

But as Daniel Webster and Johnny prove, it's never been impossible to outsmart or outmaneuver the devil. Though we tend to get very proud when we resist temptation, the devil is always a very defeat-able character. And frequently, the devil comes back after being turned away once.

As Luke tells us today, "He departed from [Jesus] until an opportune time."

It's not hard to figure out when that opportune time would be.

It will be the next time that things get really desperate for Jesus: when he is arrested by the authorities.

"*You'll be just another dead Jewish rebel...*" the devil will whisper again, but again, Jesus will refuse to listen, go to the cross, and die, only to be raised again and to defeat death forever. So no, this isn't your typical "contends with the devil" story, and there is more to the story of Jesus in the wilderness than "we should resist the devil too."

But also, on that night when Jesus was arrested, Judas will betray him for money and Peter will deny him out of fear. While we humans *can* resist evil on our own, we also have a distinct tendency not to — especially when we're desperate.

We react out of fear when we are threatened, and we refuse to do good to others because of that fear. We *know how* to outsmart, out-talk, and defeat evil, but too often, we don't, no matter how many times we re-read this story and analyze Jesus' strategy.

We don't tell this story of Jesus' victory over Satan in the wilderness to mourn our own defeat. We tell it because Jesus did much more than Daniel Webster or Johnny or a lifetime of resisting temptation ever could.

Jesus didn't just *outsmart* evil. Despite and even in the midst of human failure, Jesus defeated evil once and for all, and in doing so, he set us free from the claim that death has on us. Because it doesn't matter how often you defeat the devil if you are still bound to die. Like Daniel Webster, you can out-debate even Satan himself and become a legend — you can even be the most moral person who ever lived, but they'll still bury you.

This is why the Jesus story is different. On the night he was betrayed, while humanity stood outside giving in to evil and fear, Christ gave himself for us. He was raised again so that we would not, no matter how many times we outsmarted the devil, be forever buried, with only fiddles and thunderstorms by which to remember us. We resist evil and do good not to become legends or win back our souls, but because Christ resisted evil first.

So, we continue in the journey of Lent, following after Jesus, knowing that while our Lenten disciplines and our outsmarting of evil for a time may make us feel good, it is Jesus, not we and our penitence, doing the real work. The temptation story isn't just another story of the devil's defeat. It is *our* story of redemption.

The story of *The Devil and Daniel Webster* ends, "They say that whenever the devil comes near Marshfield, even now, he gives it a wide berth. And he hasn't been seen in the state of New Hampshire from that day to this."

Because of Christ, may evil give *us* a wide berth, and may we remember that it is not we who contend with evil — it is Christ who defeated it already. Amen.

Works Cited:

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Published by the Office of Communication of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017

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