

Friend of the Devil (1Mar2020)
Genesis3, Matt4:1-11, Romans5:12-19

“She’s a devil with a blue dress, blue dress on.”¹

Although the devil does show up this morning with Jesus, we can’t really say how the devil shows up. It’s not described. Even Don Falkos’ eerie voice is added interpretation. There are no words about a hayfork or bifurcated tail, no fiery eyes or red horns. The estimations on the cover of your bulletin may be creepy or silly or more of a feeling of malevolence.

But I don’t think studying those images will help you know what to look out for. There seems to be perpetual allure in trying to capture these images...even while it is we who are lured into captivity. Though the temptations are real—lust for power, for protection, for our appetites—how they come at us may not be so obvious.

“You’re the devil in disguise. Oh yes you are.”²

In the Genesis reading it’s not the devil at all. It’s not even clearly a snake, as Chuck Pils would



want me to be sure you observe. (And, while we’re on the topic of what it’s not: it’s not an apple. They don’t grow in the Middle East. That’s why we have pomegranates here today,

which—with apologies to my internship congregation in Wenatchee, WA—are a heckuva lot more tempting than a Red Delicious.) Anyway, it’s not a snake; it’s a serpent. And the serpent isn’t the devil. It’s just your run-of-the-mill talking serpent.

More to the point: is it really its fault? You may also try to claim that my dog ate your homework, but there’s probably a time to accept some responsibility.

Still...

“Some people claim that there’s a woman to blame.”³

Blame ripples onward. This story from Genesis blames animals. It blames other humans. It blames God.

Most insidiously, whether chicken or egg, the story has either given rise to rotten male-centered culture, or has been warped and abused as a tool for that culture’s patriarchal purposes. The woman is seen as the bad one for giving in to temptation, and then further corrupting her husband into sin. The blame for this woman continues to spread on and on.

I’d note that—though her doofus husband will eat whatever is handed to him—at least she engages in debate. She also suffers for getting caught in the middle.

To come back to the song, “Some people claim that there’s a woman to blame, but I know it’s my own damn fault.”

And yet, is it only my fault?

“I can’t stop this feeling, deep inside of me.”⁴

For our own part, we’d like to be good, like to do right. I can’t just pass the buck. I may have to admit it’s my own damn fault. But it’s also inescapable. No matter how hard I try, I keep messing up and things don’t go how I want.

We still proclaim that God created us good. The Genesis story is for the sake of believing a good God didn’t create all these problems and messes or make us do wrong. We don’t want God to be to blame.

But we’ve got such an apparent problem. We can’t stop the feeling, can’t stop sinning, even though we want to. We are bound to struggle with

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xXy7qYAKrfc>
² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AyD62ZYdlMg>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohDqjRGqplU>
⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NrI-UBIB8Jk>

sin, in separation from or rebellion against God, fracturing relationships even with those we love, much less with the rest of creatures whom we find degrees of loveable or with trees that we want to use for our own selfish advantage.

If it seems so inevitable, original sin is a way to say God's goodness must've gotten corrupted, infected. Original sin isn't that we do an original sin like poking a badger with a spoon⁵. That would be unusual, but this doctrine says we have it originally, from the get-go. It's trying for a why, or maybe simply conceding that it's not about your failure to put in the effort. Sin seems somehow inbred in our tendencies. Sinfulness is something we inherited. We're born with it.

"Mama tried to raise me better, but her pleading I denied. That leaves only me to blame 'cause Mama tried."⁶

Merle Haggard wouldn't accuse his mother, but among the severe misuses of Genesis, some theologians kept trying to condemn Eve and said that it was through the birth canal that sinfulness was passed on to the next generation.

Again, blame doesn't help anything. It doesn't reduce your fault or culpability or sinfulness. So trying to implicate this through women (and through mothers, no less!) is shameful and extrapolates something Genesis never intended.

So what about...

"In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida, baby."⁷

The Garden of Eden, from the time it was put into the Bible, was intended as a fable to frame reality. If we had a time machine, we could not take it back 6000 years to visit Adam and Eve. They didn't exist that way.

We know our DNA traces back not to apples in Eden, but to the first homo sapiens 300,000 years ago, to Lucy, the first upright hominid in the Rift Valley of Africa 3.2 million years ago, to earlier evolution of mammals. Maybe as we expand our awareness of other creatures, we

discover sin is not only a human propensity, and we place its origins still closer to the dawn of life on earth.

Wherever it came in, and without needing to think our view is bleak or pessimistic, it seems like we can pretty realistically say we've got to deal with sin. The Romans reading is admitting that, knowing it's deadly inescapable. So...

"Bad boys, bad boys, whatcha gonna do? Whatcha gonna do when they come for you?"⁸

Maybe rather than looking back to origins, we look forward for solutions. It probably points not to technical remedies of genetic manipulation or evolutionary expectations that we'll grow out of it. It may not be psychological or sociological, that we can learn about our large or small families of origin and be able to address our inherent tendencies.

It is likely that some very core part of our sense that things aren't right and we wish they were better is what brings us to church. It's what points us back to God. We're finally looking to Jesus.

Returning to the Gospel reading, we still have this urge to hear this story from Jesus and try to respond...

"Anything you can do, I can do better."⁹

Yet that's not what salvation is about. Jesus responds to the devil. He responds to temptation. He doesn't give in when taunted and baited and lured. We like those things, and think they may help us also to defeat sin. We want to be strong and resilient and faith-filled, too.

But that's not how this story goes. It's about Jesus. It's not about how you respond to sin. It's about how Jesus responds for you.

The same taunts from the devil in this story—"if you are the Son of God"—come back to taunt Jesus on the cross. It signals that's where God deals with sin, with temptation, with death, with this inescapable problem.

⁵ <https://dai.ly/x6s30i3> (at 36:00 -- not, as Lindy heard, "plunking a banjo with a spoon")

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKuc4nfJByc>

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCKHanF4v1w>

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NG2ci9CyiwI>

⁹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WO23WBji_Z0

“A whole new world...”¹⁰

That’s the amazing news of the Romans reading: that even though we know this is prevalent and an inescapable human reality, just as prevalent and inescapable is Jesus. He’s creating a new reality, a new beginning. Or he’s recreating it. Making you into something new and original, filled with grace and life.

For all the forbidden fruit you eat, for all the

temptations that get the better of you again and again, for all the sin and fractures, for the evil that lurks beyond your lookout and pounces unsuspecting, Jesus is still more inescapable. As much as you may know sin, Jesus knows you more. Anybody who confronts death, it says in another place, is more surely alive in Christ (1Cor15:22). Or to take it to the cosmic level, whether on earth or in the heavens, all things are

reconciled through his cross (Col1:20).

That’s why we can sing a better song.

Hymn: *Tree of Life and Awesome Mystery* (ELW 334)



according to Agostino Musti (1518)



according to Félix Joseph Barrias (1860)



according to Simon Bening (16th C)



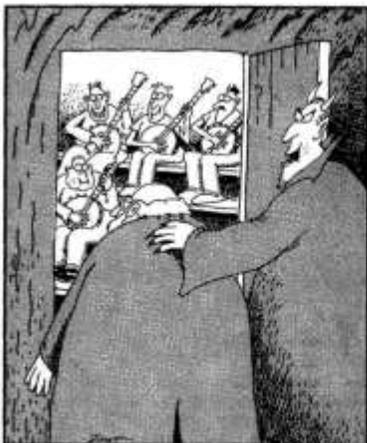
according to Edvard Munch



according to Paul Gauguin



according to Salvador Dalí



"Your room is right in here, Maestro."

according to (Lutheran) *Far Side* author Gary Larson



according to "O Brother Where Art Thou"



according to "The Simpson"