In my nascent preaching career, I find myself offering at least as many questions from the pulpit as I offer grand statements of faith. And Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness, of which we read in today’s gospel from Luke, it invites many questions:

One might be: How are we *tempted* as Jesus was tempted? Another: Is the ability to quote scripture really *so* critical to our spiritual health and protection? Or more broadly: Where do we see the deserts or wildernesses of our lives?

Many questions indeed. But another question, one we don’t spend much time considering - at least openly - another question grabs me this time:

What should we make of the devil?

The Prince of Darkness, Satan, Mephistopheles, Lucifer, The Evil One … The Devil. This figure appears in the Bible in nearly as many different ways as it sports different names. And moreover, a quick glance at the history of Christian thought will show at least as many understandings at any given point in time. The spectrum of consideration regarding the Devil however, has almost always had two consistent poles - one being a completely metaphorical view - we might think of it as “the devil within us”. And the other pole being completely literal - we might think of this one as “the devil behind every bush”.

But as with any thought experiment, I often find that sticking to one extreme or another tends to invite more problem than clarity. And in the case of considering what to make of the Devil, C.S Lewis would agree. In his introduction to the famous Screwtape Letters, he writes:

““There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race [being humanity] can fall about the devils. One is to *disbelieve* in their existence. The other is to believe and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They [the devils] themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.”

If you already find yourself making sense of the Devil near one of these two poles [total metaphor or profoundly literal] I don’t presume to offer some better, third way this morning. What I do offer, is an invitation to minimally check in briefly with yourself about what you make of the Devil - the entity and all his works that we renounce each time we reaffirm our baptismal covenant. Given that, it seems at least a little important to consider what you make of the Devil. And it is perhaps even more important to consider what that Devil… makes of *you*.

The Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, introduces this shadowy entity not in the Garden of Eden as a snake - at least not directly, contrary to popular opinion - but instead the introduction occurs somewhat casually as *ha-Satan*, or, the Satan. The Hebrew here is important because the *name* we’ve come to understand as Satan, isn’t so much a name as it is a title. “The Satan” is most often translated as adversary, or obstacle, or opponent. That nuance was then rendered into the Greek *Diabolos* implyingaslanderer, perjuror, or adversary. So, if titles function as any way of knowing who or what this entity really is, we can already see a bit of subtle shift due only to translational difference.

One last piece of nerdy backdrop information before I get to my point is found in the opening scene of the book of Job. You remember Job! He was great! He did all the right things, he loved and obeyed God. In fact, God even tells ha-Satan - The Satan - during a meeting of the heavenly court: “There is no one like [Job] on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.” Even so, God gives The Satan permission to afflict Job with terrible pain and tragedy seemingly only to test what God already knew to be true. God does know, everything, after all…

But wait a minute. What was The Satan doing in heaven in the first place? I thought it was supposed to be in Hell… Clearly the cosmic storyline is a bit unclear, at least regarding the infamous “fall from grace” that we’ve commonly understood this ex-angel to have experienced. At least this morning, I regret to say that part will remain unclear. But one question from Job’s tussle with the Devil connects in my mind to Jesus’ tussle with the same entity in the wilderness that we read of today.

The question is this: does what we make of the Devil in these stories only impact how we perceive the *Devil*? Or is there a chance that what we make of the Devil in these stories might also have the ability to color how we perceive *God*? And, if that’s the case - what is the risk, if any, to our life of faith in letting that go unexamined?

Evil, pain, suffering, loss, death. These are glaring problems in our life. I’d like to think that’s why we call it, the problem of evil. Held in the hands of an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-present and loving, life-giving God… why all the evil? What are we to make of *that?*

Diabolical historian [we might say] Jeffrey Burton Russell offers in his study of conceptions of the Devil in the Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity: “These traditions have had to *cope* with the responsibility *of God* for evil.”

God? Responsible for evil? This idea can be a stretch - and I’ll admit it makes me squirm a bit. It feels much better to just blame the Devil for the evil, not think too closely about the “*wh*y”, and just get on with my life trying to be faithful like Job, never cursing God in the face of suffering. It feels better. It’s easier. But, what then does *this* Devil, make of *me*? Well…it makes me a little less than outright and honest with my loving God, for starters.

“God, what are you *doing* about all this evil?” Here we are, staring it down every day, believing in the saving work of Jesus… but it’s still here. And all that evil, even if it is all the Devil’s fault - it’s staring back and we don’t know what to do about it.

War is staring back – if we need a timely example. In fact, war and all the suffering that it facilitates has been staring at us for a long time… we’ve just broken eye contact until recently.

Understanding the “problem of evil” has been…well…a problem for the faithful for a very long time. I suspect it will remain so. But when we’re *tempted* tobelieve that we’re staring down evil alone, we’re reminded in today’s gospel that God stares it down too - in the wilderness.

As the Devil hissed to God in Jesus the Christ that bread would be enough, Jesus resisted the temptation to embrace the evil lie that we can do all this on our own. When the evil delusions and empty promises of idolatry were passed as a quick fix to find ultimate meaning in something other than God - Jesus did something about that evil. And as that same devil - metaphorical, real as you or me, or something in between - when that devil scratched at that ever-present temptation to life out life as if God doesn’t keep God’s promises…well then Jesus made something of that Devil before it could make something of him. The liar that it is.

So, what do *you* make of the Devil? Or more importantly, what does that Devil make of you? Too metaphorical and we run into questions about evil that threaten to make us to be less than honest with an all-knowing God. Too literal, behind every bush, and that Devil is given far more power and credit that it deserves in this creation that was first, and foremost, very good.

Wherever you land, know that Jesus has been there too, stared evil in the eyes, and saved the world all the same. We may never *truly* understand in this life the role that this ancient adversary really plays in our world or the extent to which all the evil that befalls is compliment of the Devil, or of our own doing. Regardless, Jesus saw Satan fall like lightning. So, I recommend that when we encounter the Devil in our mind, behind a bush, or elsewhere, let us again follow the example of Christ. Address it, stare it in the eyes, rebuke it and all its works, and then return our gaze to the Almighty God. The God who *is* doing something about all this evil – and we very well might have a part to play.

Amen.