

**Sermon Preached February 22, 2015
Year B, Lent 1
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury**

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I lurk in the bushes during the baptism. The enemy's Son approaches the river. I want to stop him, but it's not yet time to reveal myself. Wait until he is weak. Temptations always work best then. The Son steps boldly into the Jordan. He and John embrace. The crowds are silent, but expectant. John performs the baptism. Then suddenly, emotions soar and everyone realizes this is an event of the Father, my enemy. The light and joy of the event is disgusting! I can hardly crouch there and watch it.

Afterwards the heavens tear apart, the noise is like thunder, and the Holy Spirit, that fluttering goody-two-shoes, comes flapping down like she owns the world. Well, she and her cohorts may own it now, but one day I will!

Anyway, the Holy Spirit descends and fills the Son. He glows with her radiance and his every movement is heavenly. Everyone can see it. The crowds rustle with anticipation. Then that horrible voice speaks, the one which makes me cringe. No one hears it but the Son and me, but everyone senses something special. My enemy says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." It makes me want to gag.

Fortunately that joyful tableau lasts only a few seconds before my moment arrives. With the amount of protection he gives his Son, you could almost imagine the enemy is working for me. Because right then, flappy Holier-than-thou Spirit turns off sunshine mode and immediately turns into a raging hawk. Again, no one can see this, but She drives Jesus into the desert. The enemy's Son barely has time to call out a thank you over his shoulder before he is hightailing it out to the sand and scrub. I scurry forth, careful to avoid the John crowd, and begin my mission.

The enemy has played right into my hands! I can hardly believe it. Sure, Jesus is still glowing from the strength gained in baptism, but now he is in my territory. He has to play by my rules. I intend to squash him. I want to see him betray himself, his father, and the world. I want to see the pain in his eyes when he realizes that he's no better than me. He will be tempted, he will sin, and then his mission will evaporate, like mist off the mountains. How easy my goals will be to achieve without a Messiah getting in the way!

I lurch into the desert and call upon my minions. Demons and the damned gather round as I sputter out my demands. They are to enter into the wild beasts, which are then to torment the Son during his time of trial. I have forty full days to do my work. This should be easy.

The Son finds a rock against which to lie. The heat is still sweltering even though it is the end of the day. He wipes his brow, kneels, and begins to pray. I ooze over to where he is. He can probably sense my presence, but I choose not to reveal myself -- yet.

But I watch him closely. That mealy-mouthed prince, calling on his father to protect him; he's a hopeless sap. As the day cools into evening, he's still in prayer. Once it gets dark, he finally ends the prayer, lies down, and tries to sleep. At this time the wild beasts move in. There are growls and yowls in the distance. The Son tosses and turns. It's cold. The animals close in, snarling. The Son can't sleep.

Just as the beasts are about to attack, wouldn't you know it, Mr. King-of-the-World sends his dewy-eyed angels down to protect Jesus. Sure, anyone can look ferocious with a sword in their hand, but do they really know how to use them? Unfortunately the beasts don't want to test that theory. The angels keep the animals at bay. But even though they keep back, the wild beasts continue to sulk and howl in the distance the entire forty days. I hope it keeps the Son's nerves on edge.

After a couple of weeks of this, I figure I should begin. The Son is hungry, thirsty, and exhausted by the wilderness. He is weak. I had done a little research during that time to get the full outline of his mission, and its scope was truly impressive. But it gave me just what I needed to do my work. I now know where his weaknesses are.

At first I begin with the obvious. While he's in prayer, I slither over to his side and whisper in his ear, "You don't have to do this, you know. It's your choice to go through with this test or not. You can turn the Father down. You can go into town today and get food, wine, and a comfortable bed in which to sleep." I let him mull this over for a while, and then I repeated it throughout the day. Perhaps the image of a lamb kabob

briefly floated through his mind, I'm not sure, but he certainly didn't flinch. He continued to kneel in prayer. In fact, it may have caused him to pray harder.

After a week of that, I decided I needed to get sneakier. Sneakiness, of course, is my forte, so I rather enjoyed the opportunity. You see, the trick is to figure out what he really wants to do, then package it in a way that makes it seem like he's doing the right thing, but he's not. It's a combination that is hard to resist!

So the next time he was in prayer, my message changed. I whispered to him, "You are so devoted to these humans. They want a messiah. They need someone to lead them out from under the oppression of Rome. At the same time you want them to believe in the Kingdom of God. Why do you have to suffer now and then again later in Jerusalem? Why not take a more direct route? If you left right now, you could raise an army and in a few weeks have liberated the entire region! The Romans would flee! People would cheer you in the streets! They would call you Messiah! They would believe anything you tell them. Then you could tell them your big message, to repent and believe in God. If you do it this way, you would be doing essentially what the Father wants, right? Maybe not exactly, but pretty close. And besides, it would involve a whole lot less suffering on your part. And couldn't you get more people to follow you this way than the Father's way?" (smile)

The beauty of this message is that it looks like what he's supposed to, but it isn't. If he just leads the Israelites to a local freedom, his power throughout the centuries is lost.

And without his death and resurrection, the freedom these people will experience is simply freedom from Rome and not the more powerful freedom from death. At first glance my message looks the same as the enemy's, but if you examine it more closely, it brings about an entirely different result. One much more favorable to my goals.

Jesus continues in prayer. There is sweat pouring down his shirt. But this time I can see visions of battles in his mind. He can imagine victory over the Romans. He can see the people cheering him. He can see his friends grateful to him for his triumph. The Son is suffering and my message is chipping away at his resolve. He is tempted. His goodness and desire to help the people dovetails nicely with his desire to be comfortable and believed. I've been keeping it up for weeks.

But fire and brimstone! He hasn't actually agreed to or done anything sinful! This is harder than I originally planned.

All through these days the Son is fasting. The angels tend to him and give him just enough water to keep him alive. They keep the wild beasts away. He isn't flourishing, but he is surviving. Sometimes I think these periods of testing actually make humans stronger. I'll have to look into that. In the meantime, the enemy stands by his Son, but I haven't given up yet.

In the final few days of the ordeal the Son looks awful. He is haggard, unshaven, and sunburned. Unfortunately for me, there also seems to be a joyful resolve in his eyes.

This doesn't bode well for the forces of evil, but if I don't act now, I may never get another chance. The Son raises his arms up in prayer when I crawl over to him. His whole body radiates fulfillment. As I arch up to whisper another temptation in his ear, suddenly, I feel a zap of fire and I tumble back into the sand. Blast that fluffy, twerpy Holy Spirit. She's been there the whole time, darn her! She knocked me off my claws. Then the Son quietly, but firmly commands me to be gone. Commands ME! Can you imagine that?! I can do nothing but obey. Even I must submit to his words, but never willingly! I still keep up the battle.

I heard later that Jesus made it through the wilderness with flying colors. His Father, apparently, was very proud. For all their talents, I bet that family is just as dysfunctional as the next!.. In any case, my task now is much harder. The Son is now bringing more and more people to his side. I had to do something quickly, so I got John arrested on some trumped up charges. But without wasting a moment, the Son picks up where John left off and begins proclaiming the message that I hate more than all others. He preaches throughout Galilee and says, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

I will continue to follow him to Jerusalem.

Amen.