

In recent years, there's been increased popularity of (and great interest in) vampires, ghosts, and satanic themes. From the time my oldest daughter Brittany watched the *X-Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Killer* in the late '90s, these themes have ballooned on movie and TV screens. Why are these themes so compelling? I believe that people are drawn to these themes because they have an awareness that there are forces within our world that have evil intentions; there is a dark side of the universe.

We have sometimes struggled to name this force but "the devil" is one way it has been identified, and it is used in today's text. The tendency from our anthropomorphic perspective is to limit this dark force to an individual persona, but I think there is much more than one entity called the devil or Satan. The most comprehensive description of this "dark side" that I have studied is provided in Walter Wink's masterful trilogy of books: *Naming, Unmasking, and Engaging the Powers*. He explains "the dark side" of the "systems of domination." Society is shaped around systems: we hear of systems theory, family systems, congregational systems, systems in the workplace and in schools. Systems are constructs of ways in which people relate to each other, often unconsciously, but they become larger than life, they take on a life of their own, and they have power -- power for good and power for ill.

The temptation story is a confrontation between Jesus and the "powers of domination." Jesus was led into the wilderness *by the Spirit* for 40 days: 40 is that biblical number implying a critical situation. This story begins like an ancient initiation rite when the son is sent into the wilderness to see if he will survive and thus become a man. Jesus has 40 days to "hone" his character and fortify himself for his ministry. After Jesus has been fasting and is in a weakened condition, the devil poses three questions to Jesus. The number three in Judaic literature suggests completeness and comprehensiveness: this test covered everything! Three questions match three quotations from Deuteronomy which Jesus uses to refute the devil.

The first temptation invites Jesus to misuse his power. The devil says "why not turn this stone into bread, Jesus, aren't you hungry?" But for Jesus to use power in this way would be like saying: "Well, I can't trust God with my life, so I better do whatever I must do to stay alive." Remember, this story mirrors the Israelites who after leaving Egypt wander in the desert, hungry and complaining that "in Egypt we at least had food" Jesus will not align his power with that of the tempter.

The second temptation invites Jesus to join up with the forces of the "systems of domination" of his day (not so different than those today). The names change but the systems stay pretty much the same. They are the systems that allow some to dominate others because of poverty, race, status, health, sexuality, or gender. They are systems

that favor the Wall Street bankers and allow domination over the small business person. Jesus again refuses to align his life with the kingdoms of this world.

As I said before, sometimes these systems of domination sneak up on us. I'll give two examples. About 3 years ago, when Brittany graduated from Northwestern Law School, she had a debt of \$140,000. Without a track record of employment, she couldn't get a loan with a decent fixed interest rate, so we became her bank. We got a second home mortgage with a good fixed interest rate and she's been paying us back. In order to do this, we had to change banks, and we didn't know our new bank would be one of those "too-big-to-fail" banks. Now we wish we could take our money out of that bank, which pays big bonuses to their execs while not loaning enough to small businesses, but we are caught up in a system that affects not only us but our daughter.

The second example is Stan's favorite and I'll let him tell you about it. *"I love bananas! I must have my banana fix every morning, or the day just won't go right. When the household supply of bananas falls as low as three, that constitutes a crisis requiring immediate remedial action. For a long time eating bananas was for me one of life's innocent pleasures. It even was usually far cheaper per pound than any other fruit. Just ask yourself what other fresh fruit we can buy for 69 cents a pound!"*

Then some years ago now I happened upon an article about the sad story of banana production in Central America, and my enjoyment of bananas suddenly became far less innocent. For I learned that more than a hundred years ago, the two American businessmen who founded the infamous "United Fruit Company" saw a great opportunity for enormous profit in central America. They built railroads, assuring that they would have a monopoly on transportation. Then they began planting bananas, first in the ample tracts of railroad right-of-way lands. Especially in Guatemala, the United Fruit Company then planted vast tracts of land of which it had gained possession with the cooperation of the reigning military dictatorship, reducing the local peasant folk to poorly paid migrants barely able to survive on seasonal work. Though some of the worst of the United Fruit Company's abuses are now no longer practiced by its successor Chiquita, the old plantation system remains. From a business standpoint, these plantations proved immensely profitable to a few. But the workers, who have little choice, remain in poverty.

So the awful thought came to me. The price of bananas remains low because the workers are poor -- and vice versa. And I am one of the beneficiaries. Because they can hardly feed their children, I can feed mine better. Because they are poor, I am better off. They are helping to pay for my good fortune. By eating all those bananas, I support a system which hurts others. And in the awful logic of oppression, by not eating bananas, by thus reducing the value of their product, I wound them in still another way. In other words, I am complicit in this way in the world's brokenness. With every banana I eat without protest, I vote my approval of the domination system from which I benefit. What can I do? Beg God's forgiveness for the past, and work hard for a new day when justice shall be done."

The third and final temptation invites Jesus to test God by seeing if God will save Jesus from a fall off the pinnacle of the temple. But Jesus will not test the ground of ho-

liness which he knows to be true. Neither will he mimic the contemporary messianic characters who ran around back then claiming supernatural abilities and heroic feats of indestructibility.

The three temptations come down to whether Jesus will or will not be part of the systems of this world, and Jesus rejects all of them, because he has decided to choose faithfulness to God. He quotes from Deuteronomy, where the the people are “bade in every way conceivable to pursue the oneness of God with all one’s heart, self and might” (Sanders, J. *The Book of Deuteronomy*). Jesus has been put to the test and now is 100% clear about his mission and his ministry. To have clear choices laid out before him and to choose to align his purposes with God’s gives him the freedom to move out from the wilderness and go forth to his ministry in Galilee. Jesus will not be tossed around by what others want him to do and to be. He will not become Israel’s military messiah to win back the kingdom of David. He will instead be God’s revelation to the world to say that the powers and principalities do not have sway. His life says to us, “you can be free.”

The systems of this world do have power to entice: sometimes the domination system can look like/sound like a good moral decision. They draw us in and if we’re not careful, they convince us that we don’t have the power to free ourselves, that the status quo is really not that bad. But Jesus was not happy with the status quo or the systems of his world. Jesus had made his choice for God, and after making that choice, he was free to live into his destiny.

The ability to say “no” is liberating: it brings freedom. During the season of Lent we can practice just saying “no” to guilt, to fear, to selfishness, to not rocking the boat. We can say “no” to all that has held us back and pressed us down, and we can move forward into the freedom of new life. We can say “no” to the societal and political forces of oppression and domination that choose who and what is of value in this world; we can be free to proclaim that Jesus sided with the downtrodden and powerless who the systems of this world didn’t lift up but kept down. When we say “no” to the systems of domination, we are on freedom’s road.

One of the most powerful musical phrases in Handel’s *Messiah* is “the kingdom of this world,” which goes in graduated downward intervals and is then abruptly reversed by the powerfully stated and rising “kingdom of our God, and of his Christ.” Listen to the genius of this reversal [musical clip from the *Hallelujah Chorus*]. This is the reversal and paradox of the freedom of knowing who we are and whose we are. It is what Jesus lived and died for. The wilderness journey leads through the dark of night to the rising of the dawn. The dark forces are still out there (the devil left Jesus “until an opportune time”), but Jesus unmask the powers to be fallen, awaiting the redemptive work of God in history through the Christ and yes, through our parts in God’s history even today.