

Today I am going to tell you two stories. The first is about Sidhartha, otherwise known as the Buddha, who abandoned a life of luxury and power so he could search for spiritual meaning. After nearly starving to death as a wandering ascetic, Sidhartha realizes that he is no closer to solving the mystery than he was when he started. He decides to sit beneath a wide-branched tree and meditate, not moving until he finds understanding.

I could tell you the story of that night, but PBS has a beautifully done art piece I would rather share with you. -----

So we see that the Buddha faces down Mara, the evil tempter, who is trying to pull him from his quest for enlightenment. Mara, our green, multi-limbed monster, is a fascinating character, creative and tireless in his desire to distract the Buddha. Every month our congregation considers a new theme, and this month our theme is Good and Evil. So Siddartha facing down Mara, who represents evil temptation in the Buddhist tradition, this seems like the perfect pair to kick off our month with.

But the thing is Buddhists see Mara as less of a 6-legged green monster than the temptation inside all of us. Mara personifies unwholesome impulses,

unskillfulness, the death of the spiritual life. Mara is the doubt and temptation we all have.

So maybe Mara and Siddhartha aren't the best model for talking about Good and Evil. Because we want a good guy and a bad guy, right? Superman destroying Lex Luther, Luke Skywalker defeating Darth Vader. Let's look to another faith for a clearer picture. So about 500 years after Siddhartha faced down Mara Jesus of Nazereth, who later some would herald as the son of God, had just been baptized by John the Baptist, his cousin. Jesus is inspired by John, and feels ready to face down the Roman Empire, bring faith to the masses,- but first he must spend a long time meditating in the desert. The New Testament of the Bible says that Jesus spent forty days fasting in the desert, but- fun fact- forty days is Bible-speak for any amount considered a long time. Maybe it was two weeks, maybe it was a year- they wrote it as forty days.

So Jesus feels that God has called him to the desert to be alone, to reflect. But the devil comes to him, to tempt him. First Satan says "Hey- so you are super hungry, right? Tummy is growling? Why not turn these rocks into loaves of bread. Tasty, flaky, warm bread. Yum. Go ahead, do it!

Now Jesus is indeed very hungry, but he feels like, Hey, I'm on this spiritual quest, this isn't about eating or not eating, it is about resisting my desires. So he says no, because- you've heard this one before- man cannot live on bread alone, but on the spiritual nourishment that comes from a relationship with the divine.

Fine, the devil says, fine. So you think you are an exceptional guy, right? Think you have a saving message for all the people. But what if you aren't so smart after all? What if you get laughed right out of town? But if you are so special, prove it. Go to that pinnacle, that highest point on the temple in town, go up there and jump. And if you are really special angels will catch you before you can even stub a toe.

Jesus has to think about this- what if this is all in his head? What if he is suffering needlessly? Maybe he does need a sign that he is doing the right thing.

But before he starts climbing to the pinnacle Jesus realizes this too is a trick. No, he isn't going to swan dive off the temple. He needs to find a courage that doesn't rely on outward praise, he has to rely on his own sense of confidence and not look to others for reinforcement.

Satan has one last trick up his sleeve. You want to change the world, right Jesus? You want to overthrow the empire, end the oppression, feed the hungry, etc. There is an easier way to get all that going. You could rule over the entire world,

all of it, right now, if you just do one simple thing. Bow down to me. Just bow down to me, and I will make you king of every kingdom.

Well that had to be tempting. As king Jesus could change all the corrupt, cruel systems, end oppression, and do it in style. In a nice robe with the stroke of a pen, not by preaching to the dusty masses. Jesus must have thought, well, if the end is the same....

But no. Jesus stays on his path, he refuses Satan's offer, and the devil leaves him. So good conquered evil, right? Luke Skywalker beats Darth Vader. But it never is that simple, is it? Because the devil in this story is the same as the devil in the other- less many-legged green monster and more the temptations of our own psyche. Less a devil in a red suit and horns, more our own desire to take the easy road, abandon the mission, seek comfort by outward acclaim.

To be perfectly frank there is some religious mythology that I can give or take. But when I see two stories, both foundational to their respective faith traditions, that are so similar, it gives me pause. Even if these stories are not factually true, it says something about us- about humanity- that we tell them again and again, over thousands of years.

As we begin our month discussing Good and Evil I want to begin by saying that Good vs Evil is never that simple. There is rarely a bad guy and a good guy, just the human mind wrestling with its own insecurities. And the temptations we face 2500 years ago are not that different than the ones we face today.

As Siddhartha sits under the Bodhi tree Mara first challenges him an invading army of men shooting flocks of arrows, pointed right at his heart. Terrifying. But Buddha faces that fear, he acknowledges it and refuses to let fear stop his quest. The arrows are not real, of course, they are just his fear, and they turn into flowers. Jesus faces the same temptation- he is so hungry, and who knows when food will be available again? Maybe he will starve to death. Fear clouds his mind, as he thinks of the warm comfort of bread. But Jesus resists, remembering his quest, and his fearful mind is defeated. What role does fear play in our ideas about good and evil? How does fear keep you from reaching your highest? Until fear is acknowledged it absorbs too much of the mind for either Jesus or Siddhartha to continue.

Next the Buddha was tempted by the lusty daughters of Mara, while Jesus was tempted by the chance to rule all the kingdoms in the world. These are the same temptation- the desire to stop struggling, stop working so hard, and have fun.

Why not pay a visit to the lusty maidens? Why not skip the hard work and play video games, give up grassroots activism for a plush king-ship? Where is mara in your life? Where are you tempted to give up your difficulties for an easier life? What role does sloth play in your spiritual journey?

Finally the Buddha is challenged by Mara- who says that you are so great? Who says that you are worthy of attaining ultimate wisdom? You are nobody! Jesus faces a similar challenge, when the satan of his mind challenges- are you sure you are up for this? If you are so powerful, throw yourself from the high point of the temple. Will the angels bother to save you? You can't really believe in yourself, can you?

Ah, self-doubt- the killer of creativity, of innovation- a thousand wonderful ideas smashed on the shore of insecurity. How many times have you felt this most intimate incarnation of the devil? Jesus and the Buddha both faced it, and could not continue toward spiritual enlightenment until they faced their inner enemy. This is the ugliest of the evils, the most effective of tyrants. How do you face your insecurity?

This month let's think about Mara, about Satan, and the harm we do ourselves when we face our desire for ease, our fear of uncertainty, and our deepest,

darkest worry that we might not be good enough, after all. Because far from being two opposing poles, good and evil are a swirl of emotional states that our psyches wrestle with. It may be easier if there were a red-horned devil we could challenge and slay, but really, when it comes to good and evil, it is all a swirl of gray in our own minds.