

Jesus Comes Face-to-Face
With The Devil
In the Hole, On the Leash, Inside Himself
Matthew 4: 1-11
Rev. Tom VandeStadt

Dennis Murphy knows I like listening to Tom Waits. Unlike Dennis, I'm not a Tom Waits scholar. But I'm more than a casual listener, though I don't know how anybody could be a casual listener of Tom Waits.

One thing I like I about Tom Waits is the characters in some of his songs have interesting relationships with the devil. For example, the song *Way Down in the Hole* from the album *Frank's Wild Years*, which by the way was a brilliant choice for the opening song in all six seasons of *The Wire*. In *Way Down in the Hole*, the character sings:

You gotta keep the devil
way down in the hole...

Don't pay heed to temptation
For his hands are so cold
You gotta help me keep the devil
Way down in the hole

Down in the hole, down in the hole
Down in the hole, down in the hole
Down in the hole, down in the hole
You gotta keep the devil
down in the hole

Check it out on You Tube, it's fantastic.

You gotta keep the devil way down in the hole. Because if the devil gets out, watch out! The devil out of the hole means the devil out of control, and once the devil is out of control all bets are off. Who knows what the devil will do while loose, but make your life a living hell. And once the devil is out of the hole, try getting the devil back in; you may never get the devil back in.

So you gotta, you *just gotta* keep the devil way down in the hole.

Then there's the song, *Going Out West*, from the album *Bone Machine*. The character singing this song is best described as menacing. Listen.

Well I'm going out west where the wind blows tall...
They've got some money out there and they're giving it away
I'm gonna do what I want
And I'm gonna get paid
Do what I want
And I'm gonna get paid...

Well, I know karate, Voodoo too
I'm gonna make myself available to you
I don't need no makeup, I got real scars
I got hair on my chest
I look good without a shirt

Well, I don't lose my composure in a high-speed chase
Well, my friends think I'm ugly, I got a masculine face
I got some drag-strip courage, I can really drive a bed
I'm gonna change my name to Hannibal or maybe just Rex
Change my name to Hannibal or maybe just Rex

That's another one you have to check out on You Tube to get the full impact of the Tom Waits effect. Here's my favorite line in the song.

Well, my parole officer will be proud of me
With my Olds '88 and the devil on the leash
My Olds '88 and the devil on the leash

This time, the devil isn't way down in the hole, the devil is out in the world. On the leash. But who's pulling who? Is the guy going out west with the devil on the leash, or is the devil going out west with the guy on the leash? Watch the video.

Keep the devil way down in the hole. Keep the devil on the leash. Fascinating imagery. A lot to explore. One immediate question is: who or what is the devil?

The way I hear and watch Tom Waits perform these songs, the devil isn't some evil being who exists separately from the guy who's singing the song. The devil is very much a part of the guy who's singing the song, a part the guy has dissociated from himself and personified as the devil. Some may call this part his shadow. The guy experiences the devil as someone else, an evil being, who's powerful and dangerous. But it's really a part of him, a part that's powerful and dangerous. A part he's gotta keep way down in the hole or on the leash, because if that part of him gets loose, watch out! All bets are off.

This morning, we read the story of Jesus contending with the devil, and in doing so, we

broke with Christian liturgical protocol. Here's how. At the beginning of Epiphany, we read the story of John baptizing Jesus in the River Jordan. And then, in the weeks that follow throughout the season of Epiphany, we read lessons about Jesus calling his disciples, healing people, teaching people and debating with the authorities. Finally, on the last Sunday of Epiphany, we read the account of Jesus being transfigured on the mountaintop. Then, on the first Sunday of Lent, we read about Jesus entering the wilderness and contending with the devil.

That's how the liturgical season unfolds, but that's not how the actual story unfolds in the first three gospels. In the first three gospels, John baptizes Jesus in the Jordan and immediately the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness where Jesus contends with the devil.

In other words, the church's liturgical season separates John baptizing Jesus from Jesus contending with the devil by a number of weeks, which can give the impression that in the actual gospel story these events are separated by time and therefore unrelated. But they're not separated by time and I doubt they're unrelated. That's why we broke with liturgical protocol this morning, to reconnect the story so we can explore the connection between the baptism of Jesus and his confrontation with the devil.

Last week I noted that baptism is a ritual that signifies the death of one reality and the birth of a new reality. Ritually stripped of one identity, the person undergoing baptism ritually takes on a new identity.

But here's the million dollar question: how does baptism become more than mere ritual? How can someone actually experience what we're calling death and birth in one's life? How can someone actually experience a noticeable transformation in one's lives, experience one's self as changed in some way? It is one thing to undergo a ritual that signifies transformation, quite another to actually experience transformation in one's life.

I suspect the time Jesus spent in the wilderness, and his encounter with the devil, brought about a profound transformation of his life.

Jesus was in the wilderness a long time. By himself. With nothing to distract him from himself, nothing to distract him from every voice in his head, every feeling in his body, every vision in his psyche. Jesus is forced to come face-to-face with himself, with all of himself, and when he does, he comes face-to-face with the devil. And when he comes face-to-face with the devil, there's no place for Jesus to run, no place for Jesus to hide. The wilderness forces Jesus to contend with the devil, who comes in the form of temptation.

What tempts Jesus?

Turning stone into bread. This is far more than turning some pebbles into little rolls of dough to feed his hungry stomach. This is the temptation to feed all of his human hungers and appetites. We humans have a number of strong hungers, many strong appetites, and they tempt us to turn the earth into things to feed our strong hungers and appetites, things we can consume, accumulate and show off. Our hungers and appetites can become voracious, and once out of control, very destructive. God didn't create us to consume the earth. Yes, we must consume to live, but God didn't create us *to* consume. Our existence in God's creation is far more profound and holy than that narrow pursuit.

Another temptation is putting God in the position of performing a miracle on Jesus' behalf so everyone will know he's special. The temptation of vanity. Of self-importance. Hey everyone, look at me! God rescues me, God serves me, because I'm special. This is another primal human temptation, one that becomes very destructive when out of control. Vanity. Self-elevation. I'm the one who really matters. Or humans are the species that really matters on this earth; our species is special, the others are expendable.

Here's one more primal human temptation—control. Forget about controlling all the kingdoms in the world. I'll settle for controlling the little piece of the world in which I live. Controlling the people around me. Always getting my way because I control everything and everyone around me. It's a fantasy, I know, but how many of us are tempted to pursue this fantasy to one degree or another? Sure, we need some control over our lives, but the temptation to control the world, to control others, is also a leading source of oppression, injustice and conflict on this earth.

Appetite, vanity, control—this is the devil Jesus has been keeping in the hole or on the leash. But they're parts of himself. They're part of being human.

The wilderness forces Jesus to face and contend with these powerful and dangerous parts of himself, these primal human temptations. He faces them directly. He feels their power. He acknowledges their power. He takes their power seriously. And only by facing them, feeling them, acknowledging them, and taking them seriously, can he now deny them power over his life. And by denying them power over his life, his life undergoes a profound shift, a transformation.

Coming out of the wilderness, Jesus will not submit to the temptation to feed his many powerful human appetites. Rather, he consumes, owns and accumulates next to nothing for the rest of his life. Jesus will not submit to the temptation to elevate his own self-importance. Rather, he embodies the quality of radical humility, becomes a servant to the poor, the sinner and the outcast. Jesus will not submit to the temptation to control other people's lives. Rather, he dedicates himself to liberating other people from the powers and principalities that oppress them; he even dies to liberate them.

What Jesus does in the wilderness—directly facing his own life, his own powerful and dangerous human temptations, his own devil—and undergoing a profound transformation as a result, is the actual embodiment of what the ritual of baptism signifies. And we lose the power of that connection when we liturgically disconnect the story of Jesus' baptism from the story of Jesus contending with the devil, because it's really one story not two.

It's one story. And it's our story.

This story instructs us, teaches us, models for us, how to live out our baptism as disciples of Jesus Christ. Like Jesus, we're called to directly face our own lives, our own powerful and dangerous human temptations, our own devils. To acknowledge them, feel their power, take their power seriously, and with the grace of God, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the support of our sisters and brothers in Christ, seek to deny them power over us. And in doing so, undergo real actual changes in our lives.

You don't necessarily have to go into the wilderness to do this, though some of us might from time to time. But you can make time in your life for prayer, meditation and deep self-reflection. You can participate in your church's Discipleship support group like the one we have here. You can find ways to come face-to-face with the devil in the hole or the devil on the leash, and to give those powerful and destructive parts of your life less power over you, which in turn gives you more power to be a Christ-like presence in this world.

And if there's one thing we need in this world right now, it is more people with more power to be a Christ-like presence.