

Jesus and the Satan

Hespeler, February 25, 2024 © Scott McAndless – Second Sunday in Lent
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16, Psalm 22:23-31, Romans 4:13-25, [Mark 8:31-38](#)

Did you know that there was once a high priest who served in the temple in Jerusalem named Jesus? He was, in fact, the very first high priest who was consecrated to serve in the temple that was rebuilt after the people returned from exile in Babylon. He's mentioned in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. His name in Hebrew would have been Joshua, or in Aramaic it would have been Yeshua. But in Greek, the language of the New Testament and of the Old Testament that the gospel writers read, the name was Jesus.

Zechariah's Vision

So this was a very significant person at a very significant moment in history. And in the Book of Zechariah, we are told of a vision that the Prophet Zechariah had regarding this priest, Jesus. ([Zechariah 3:1-6](#)) In Zechariah's vision, he saw the priest Jesus being prepared to lead the sacrifices in the temple.

But then he was accused by someone called the accuser, or, in Hebrew, the Satan, of not being worthy of performing the sacrifice. The Satan said that Jesus was nothing more than **"a brand plucked from the fire,"** That is to say, he was just an upstart from the streets. He was dressed in dirty clothes and not impressive like a priest was supposed to be.

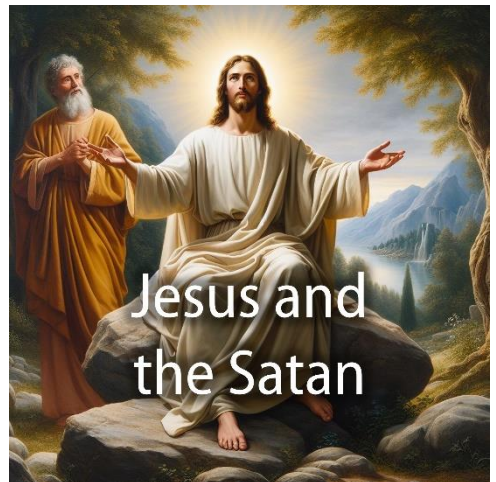
But, in this vision, Yahweh, the God of Israel, rebukes the Satan and tells him that Jesus is worthy of making the sacrifice, that God will clothe Jesus in new clean clothes and a white turban. That God will make him worthy.

I realize that this is just a vision. But visions matter a great deal in the biblical tradition, so I'd like to dwell on it for a moment. Zechariah had a vision in which the Satan rebuked Jesus for wanting to perform a sacrifice and the Satan was rebuked by God for doing so. Does any of that sound familiar?

The Satan

Oh, and you're probably wondering why I keep saying *the* Satan rather than just talking about Satan. It is because that is what it actually says in the Hebrew text. It is not a name, but rather a title. The Satan, according to much of the Old Testament, was not another name for the devil or the great enemy of God.

The Satan was actually someone who was on God's heavenly team. He had a very particular job; he operated like God's Attorney General. He challenged and tested the actions of various people to decide if they were faithful or not. He famously did that to Job at the



beginning of the Book of Job and he seems to be doing the same thing to the High Priest Jesus in Zechariah's vision.

Now, it is true that, over time, the figure of the Satan came to be mingled with another figure – the devil who operated as God's opponent and enemy – but that was a slow process and that blending had not completed when the Book of Zechariah was written. And that makes me wonder. Where are we in that blending process when it comes to the mind of Jesus or of the gospel writer in our reading this morning from the Gospel of Mark?

Peter's Good Mood

Peter had been riding high all week. Things had just been going so well. Jesus was growing in popularity. Larger and larger crowds were turning out and he was really starting to think that this whole movement was going somewhere. Everyone recognized him as a key leader. He began to dream that, as he rode on Jesus' coattails, he would see his own influence and status grow. Things were good.

One day they were just all hanging out and shooting the breeze in Caesarea Philippi when something Jesus said suddenly made Peter realize what all of this fantastic success they'd been experiencing really meant. Jesus wasn't just a really great teacher and healer. He was actually God's Messiah, the Anointed One. And so he said so – said it right in front of everyone. And then, far from denying it, Jesus said that it was all a big secret that they would have to keep for a while.

Jesus Spoils his Day

But then, all of a sudden, Jesus just crushed all of Peter's good mood. He started talking about how they would have to go down to Jerusalem and, when they did, he would undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes and that he would be killed! He said more after that, but when Peter heard that much, he got so mad that he stopped listening.

What's more, he could hardly wait to get Jesus alone so that he could tell him off for being such a downer. "Listen, Jesus," he said, "we just can't afford this kind of pessimistic thinking! You need to stop talking like that right now!" But Jesus rebuked Peter saying, **"Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."**

Coincidence?

I was rather surprised to notice the strong parallels between that famous episode in Jesus' life and the less famous vision that the Prophet Zechariah had. Do you think that it is just a coincidence that those two passages echo each other so perfectly? I don't really believe in that kind of coincidence when it comes to reading the scripture. I think there is a connection between those passages that we had better not miss.

What I'm trying to say is, I don't think that that exchange between Peter and Jesus where each rebuked the other is just about something that happened once. It is not just about that time when Jesus told his disciples what was going to happen specifically to him and his disciples, and especially Peter, really couldn't handle it.

What Messiah Means

I mean, yes, it is about that. It is obviously about what it means that Jesus is the Messiah. It is about how people like Peter had one idea about him being Messiah – that it was all about honour and glory and continual victory – and that Jesus had a very different idea, that it was actually about service and sacrifice.

And Peter tested Jesus. He didn't test him towards evil; if that had been the case, Jesus would have called him the devil. But Jesus didn't call him that; he called him Satan. He was saying that Peter's rebuke meant that Peter wanted Jesus to take the easy way out – the path of least resistance. Peter was being enticing, but he wasn't being evil.

So that was a significant moment in Jesus' ministry and the development of it. But, like I said, it wasn't just a one-time event. It happened in the time of the Prophet Zechariah too when that prophet had a vision of almost exactly the same thing happening to the priest Jesus in his own day. The two events are connected and that, to my mind, means that it is a kind of cosmic event that happened way back then and in the time of Jesus and that it just keeps happening.

The Spirit of the Satan

In other words, the spirit of the Satan is still active in the world today. And again, when I say the Satan, I do not mean it in the way that that is usually understood today. I am not talking about a great malevolent spirit who is at work in this world. I mean, sure, there may be a lot of evidence of *that* spirit at work in the world today, but that was not the spirit the Jesus was dealing with as he spoke with Peter. I'm talking about the spirit of testing that goes forth from God and tests all of our hearts as we seek to choose between what is good and what is better.

Priorities and Modern Life

No, I'm thinking about situations like this. You, everyday as you go through your life, are faced with a myriad of decisions. You are forced to prioritize certain things. In this world, we are often pushed to prioritize the things that will give us and the people in our family financial security. Indeed, that is one of the primary messages of our modern age. And there is indeed nothing wrong with doing that. We are living within a capitalistic society, and so we are pretty much forced to operate according to the capitalist system.

And so, for example, people often feel the pressure to prioritize work over family or more pay over their personal health and well-being. Of course these are good things, especially when we are doing things like creating security for the people that we love. And security usually means money in our society. And so Peter, or the Satan, is constantly coming to us and saying that we should just continue to prioritize these things.

God's Priorities

But what if God is calling you to prioritize something else? In some cases that might be your own health, or it could be about spending some real quality time with the people that you love. In some cases, God might be calling you to embrace something that has more meaning than merely

getting more money to participate in the economy. Maybe God is asking you to step out in ministry or service to others like he was calling Jesus.

And God may even be calling you to step out in a risky way to challenge what is wrong in the world right now, possibly at great personal cost. Which, of course, was also what God was calling Jesus to do.

The Satan Rebukes You

Whenever we consider any such things, whenever the call seems to be upon you to do such things, you can be sure that the Satan of this world, the people of this world who don't want anyone to rock the boat or to prioritize something different will rebuke you.

You may be at such a moment in your life right now. That's what I mean when I say that Zechariah's vision continues to play out in the modern world just as it played out for Jesus. And will you, like him, have the courage to rebuke the accuser and choose the path of courage that is before you?

Corporate Priorities

But this is not only about your individual action. This is also about how we choose to act corporately in this world. I suspect that the church, for one, is also living out Zechariah's vision today? We are still attempting to live out our models of success that we have inherited from the past, continuing to try and replicate past glories and past successes.

But many of them are not working like they once did. It is like the church has become **“a brand plucked from the fire,”** a priest in dirty clothes. But whenever anyone suggests that maybe it's time to try something new or different, what is the reaction? The Satan will rebuke us, will suggest that it would just be safer to do things as they have always been done. Will we have the courage to rebuke the Satan?

The corporate and business world all around us has become ever more fixed on profits. Every quarter they are expected to show more and more growth. That is the way of the world in which we live, after all. Corporations and businesses exist only for one goal and that is to produce ever more profits for investors. It doesn't matter who is suffering, or who can't pay their bills or can no longer afford to pay the rents so long as the investors are happy at the end of the day.

Telling the Satan to Get Behind

Now profit, in itself is a good thing. It drives investment and can create security and prosperity for many. But the Satan today seems to be telling the whole world that it is the only thing that matters and that all other things must be sacrificed to it. And when profit becomes the absolute priority, we have a problem. Will we rebuke Satan and tell him to get behind us?

You see, it still keeps on happening. The Satan, the accuser is still at work and testing us in this world. Zechariah's vision is played out over and over again, but the response is simple, and Jesus shows us the way. It is time to put the accuser behind us and to step out in faith, choosing the better over the good, choosing service over security. We can all choose to play our part in the greater work that God is doing in this world.