The Sufi poet Rumi wrote – *“And so it is, that both the Devil and the Angelic Spirit present us with objects of desire to awaken our power of choice.”* Jesus, be our companion in the wilderness. Amen

On this, the first Sunday in Lent, we began our liturgy by praying together the Great Litany. That ancient intercessory prayer was used as early as the fifth century in Rome, and is the first English language rite prepared by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, the writer of the Book of Common Prayer. The version of the Litany we prayed today has changed very little from Cranmer’s 1544 version. Of course there are a few notable exceptions, for example, we did not pray today for deliverance and protection from *“the tyranny of the bisshop of Rome and all his detestable enormyties”*. Thank God some things have changed.

One prayer that has remained unchanged from that day to this is the petition to deliver us *“from all evil and wickedness; from sin; from the crafts and assaults of the devil; and from everlasting damnation.”* From the crafts and assaults of the devil. We don’t really see that many references to “the devil” in our liturgies or in our conversations. In fact, an Internet query including the words “Episcopal Church and Satan” turned up a lot of Evangelical critiques of the “Satanic Episcopal Church” and little toward nothing about how we think about Satan in our denomination. No, we don’t much chitchat about Satan in the Episcopal Church. It seems that the Devil is best left to the 1500’s.

But wait, what about that question we ask of baptismal candidates or their parents and godparents? It’s right there on page 302 in your BCP. *“Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?”* We are in on that too as we vow to support those persons in their life in Christ.

But Satan? Really? This is 2018. Do I believe in a scarlet-skinned fallen angel with horns and a pointy tail, plotting with demons to entice humans into eternal damnation? No, but I do agree with Episcopal priest Jody Howard when he acknowledges *“there are times when it is difficult for many of us, given our post-Enlightenment and science-influenced worldviews, to talk easily of evil, demonic forces, or the Devil himself. And yet, I believe it is partly that difficulty that makes it so necessary that we do talk about these forces.”*

And Satan is right there today in the Gospel of Mark. At first glance, it seems that the devil barely gets a mention but remember, this is Mark. Everything is at rapid pace…. Jesus is baptized,….. the heavens are torn apart,……. God declares his Love and pleasure in his Son,…. and Jesus is immediately driven into the wilderness with the wild beasts and angels that attend to him, and he is tempted by Satan. In the brevity of this passage from Mark, we might miss an important element; Jesus was with Satan for 40 days. We know that 40 days is Biblical code for substantial period of time.

Luke and Matthew speak volumes about Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. Mark leaves satanic temptation entirely to our imagination. Now we know that Satan, no matter how clever and charming a devil he may be, is no match for the Beloved Son of God, but it could not have been an easy time for Jesus. I have to say that I find the lack of detail in Mark’s account more unsettling than knowing the specifics of temptation. Even our prayers in the Litany today might leave our uneasy imaginations open to any manner of evil that may come our way. Crafts and assaults of the devil. Ooooh!

There is a tale I recently heard told entitled “Satan had a problem”. It seems that Satan was finding that humans weren’t paying him enough attention. He called his chief demons together and charged them to come up with new ways of turning the hearts and minds of humanity toward evil. Several weeks passed and the Devil reconvened his satanic counsel. *“What have you come up with?”* he asked.

The first demon that piped up said, *“I have conceived of the most devious lie possible. We need to tell humans that there is no right or wrong.”*  The devil thought about what the demon presented and smiled broadly. *“That is devious”*, he said. *“With no shared sense of right and wrong the humans will quickly fall into confusion and mayhem. They will have no trouble finding ways to justify fulfilling their self-serving desires. Very good work indeed!”*

The second demon, not to be outdone, quickly spoke up, *“Satan, I know you will approve of this lie. We will convince humans that there is no real truth; we will convince them they cannot believe what they see with their own eyes.” “Brilliant”* exclaimed Satan, *“with no shared foundation of truth humanity will easily forget their common bonds of decency and justice. Wonderful and creative work!”*

At first glance, this may seem simply like an evil fairy tale, just a product of modern day Grimm Brothers fantasy, but the reality is that we are presented each day with the crafty work of the forces of evil. Just a few moments in the daily news cycle may seem like 40 days or 40 years in Biblical Standard Time. Some lies are obvious and easy to pick off, but others are much more subtle and hide behind the masquerade of thin veneers of truth-ish-ness.

Satan, delights in our feelings of helplessness and impotence and would love nothing more than to have us become increasingly desensitized to violence, injustice, dishonesty and cruelty. And hey, why not believe that insidious voice that tells us there’s not enough to go around and we need to make sure we protect our piece of the pie from people just looking for a handout. You see, Evil rejoices when we buy into the lie that acts of violence are only reflective of the individuals that commit them, while we simultaneously deny the existence of corporate societal sin that promotes a culture of fear, distrust and blame.

But Jesus comes to us out of the wilderness, knowing the temptations we face as humans and exclaims the Kingdom of God is at hand! In him we have a revolutionary reorienting of spirit – an urgent breaking in of God’s reign in us. In his words and actions we are called to feed the hungry, heal the sick, give to the poor, raise people up to serve each other, speak out against the systems that willfully ignore and deny need and injustice. Jesus is making this world new in the Baptismal waters of the Good News of his Gospel.

In bringing us to new life Jesus calls us to repent. I love the description of repentance as a turning. (Describe/demonstrate turning motion from kids Lord’s Prayer) In Lent we enter into a season of turning. Turning requires our active engagement. During these 40 days in the wilderness where we prepare for discipleship, there are things we may turn toward, others from which we may turn away. In either case we are called to pay attention and to learn. This is a time to admit our brokenness and to out seek the healing balm of the Spirit, both for our selves and for the whole Body of Christ. It is a time to find our center once again in God.

I have been taking part in the SSJE program, Meeting Jesus in the Gospel of John. On the second day of the series, Brother Mark Brown reflected about God’s love for the world. He said this, *“So which is the world that God loves? Is it the world, the creation in its original glory, or is it the world that is fallen, broken, imperfect, sinful? Well, of course it’s both.”*

Fallen, broken, imperfect, sinful; and yet we are loved by our Maker. There is a lovely Japanese art form called Kintsugi. It is the practice of mending broken pottery by joining the shards together with resin impregnated with precious metals – gold and silver. The philosophy is to value both brokenness and repair as part of the object’s history, and not hide the flaw. It honors the beauty and brokenness that exists in the original… and the new creation.

Christ is our ultimate source of reconciliation and our companion in the wilderness. Through Jesus we are Kintsugi, healed and joined in God. As Paul says, *Christ is our peace – the Peace that the world cannot give that flows from the Spirit.* We proclaim God’s healing presence and influence each and every time we meet in the name of Jesus the Christ. It is a sacramental force for the healing of society and against which Satan and the forces of evil cannot stand.

Amen.