

## **The Devil Made Me Do It**

*Sermon by Heather Grantham*

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The question today is one of great importance. I didn't really know what I was getting into when I volunteered to speak on these huge questions. "Is Satan real?" "Does evil exist?" Such questions run throughout the history of humankind and they are basic to our struggle toward God. I started my research, as any person of my age does, with the google search engine. One of the sites, talked about how the Beatles brought satan into this world - Paul and the gang apparently were best friends with the beast. I was also taken to the band Poison's website and also to the Church of Satan's book of secrets. All these websites (and believe me there were thousands) show us that evil and Satan are things we think about. Today, I focus on the problem of Satan and the historical back drop that this idea came out of. If you stay after church, we can talk more about the broader issues of Satan and Evil.

I learned early on in my Sunday School classes to envision Satan as an evil thing with red skin. He had huge muscles, wore only pants, carried a pitch fork. He also had two huge horns burgeoning from his head. I held this view up to high school where I found out that this view is primarily a western one. We read Dante's *The Divine Comedy* in my English class where Satan is a giant beast, frozen mid-breast in ice at the center of Hell. Here, Satan has three heads and affixed under each chin are pairs of bat like wings. As Satan beats his wings, he creates a cold wind which continues to freeze the ice surrounding him, and the other sinners in the Ninth Circle. We also read Milton's *Paradise Lost* which presents Satan as an ambitious and proud being who defies his creator, omnipotent God, and wages war on Heaven, only to be defeated and cast down. I began to question whether we human beings created this being or if Milton and Dante really saw the evil being they wrote about. I didn't know much about anthropology or sociology then, so I put my questions on the back burner until I volunteered to do this sermon.

In her book *The Origin of Satan*, Elaine Pagels presents a sociological and historical picture of Satan - also known as Devil, Beelzebub, Lucifer, Evil One, Prince of Darkness, and even Old Nick. Satan - or ha-satan in hebrew - did not begin as the being we envision today. When presented in the Hebrew Bible, the satan is a member of God's heavenly court. The Satan comes

from the root word *stn* meaning “one who opposes, obstructs, or acts as adversary”. In the beginning of the book of Job, the satan is introduced as a roving intelligence agent or a spy, powerful but still subordinate to God, under God’s control. After God brags about the servant Job, the satan challenges God’s assertion that Job would remain faithful no matter what. God then authorizes the satan to afflict Job with devastating loss. But Job holds fast to his faith. In the passage we read from the book of Job, the satan challenges God again about Job saying that, “of course Job wouldn’t budge because we only hurt his possessions, not his body.” God then allows the satan to do what the satan sees fit. The satan might terrify or harm a person but, like the angel of death, the satan always remains an angel, a member of the heavenly court and ultimately God’s obedient servant. So how do we get this completely different picture?

Pagels claims that the the satan began to transform into the devil we know today during the social situation of the Ancient Near East around the time of Jesus’s birth. The Kingdom of Israel’s land was very desirable to other surrounding nations. It was in the path of trade routes and the bridge separating and connecting very powerful nations. The Israelites lived in very unstable times and a very unstable location. Israel was dominated and conquered by several of the surrounding nations AND at least one nation - Babylon - captured and exiled many of the Jewish people. It was during the Exilic period that most of the Hebrew Bible was written and/or edited. The Jewish people gained independence for a brief time in the second century bce, only to come under Roman rule soon after. It was during their brief independence and their new status as a vassal state of the Roman Empire that the Jews began to argue about who was the true Jew - the true people of the covenant. The Jewish nation was at conflict within itself. The line that once divided the Israelites from other nations, became a line dividing groups within Israel. Revolts began and extremists gathered on the margins. These marginal groups began to invoke the satan to characterize their Jewish opponents; in the process they turned this rather unpleasant angel into a far grander - and far more malevolent - figure. The satan no longer was one of God’s faithful servants, but God’s antagonist, God’s enemy, even God’s rival. These marginal extremists formed their own stories and wrote their own “books” on the subject. The one I found most interesting was the Essenes. They claimed they were the true Israel and called themselves the “sons of light” and referred to every other Jew as the “sons of darkness” This men’s group (no women allowed) hid away in caves and had rigid rules they had to follow. They had to wear

white robes and must remain clean at all time. They must be celibate and had strict dietary fasting. A person wishing to become an Essene must go through a hazing and ritual similar to our fraternities today. These “sons of light” expounded upon the satan personifying him to be the ultimate evil figure in the battle of Good and evil where they were the center. They were very apocalyptic and claimed they would be fighting for God on the judgment day. Christianity - which began as a Jewish Cult - incorporated this idea of the satan and some of the earliest believers - Paul for example - even incorporated these apocalyptic leanings.

This is obviously an over simplification of the evolutionary process of an angel in the heavenly realm morphing into the ultimate evil always in opposition to God. And I do admit that all this information is a lot of intellectual work and doesn't really help us when we are sitting in the midst of temptation. And certainly we will always live in the face of evil. Even Jesus commanded us to pray “lead us not into temptation deliver us from evil.

One of the most interesting things I find in the process of the satan becoming SATAN is the fact that the greatest and most dangerous enemy did not originate, as one might expect, as an outsider, an alien, or a stranger. Satan is not the distant enemy, but the intimate enemy - one's trusted colleague, close associate, brother or sister. Many religious traditions prefer looking at evil as something “out there” something that is not connected to the core of who they are. However, this is not the case! Satan is intimate - evil is intimate! In pop culture we often paint a picture of us having an angel and a devil on our shoulders telling us what to do... This isn't something foreign to us telling us what to do, it is our own voice guiding and tempting us!

I find it amazing that in the gospel of Mark, Jesus calls Peter, his most trusted disciple and good friend, Satan. Jesus is not saying that Peter has become a cloven hoof, red being. Instead he is stating that Peter is tempting him. Peter is speaking to the deep human part of Jesus that doesn't want suffering. This moves the argument from a scholarly polemic of “what is the name of this evil?” TO a question of “how do we respond to this evil when it is so intimate”. We look at our scripture lesson where Jesus is tempted in the desert. It was natural for the gospel writer to write of Satan tempting Jesus, given his cultural context. However, maybe this story is more about the human part of Jesus. Jesus was at odds with himself and here the image of the angel and devil on

our shoulder can be helpful. Jesus denied the little devil on his shoulder and leaned into the God of love present within all of us. This story calls each of us to lean into the bosom of this loving God. This is a model of how to resist that dangerous voice within each of us.

Whether or not we believe in a spiritual being who is always getting in our face and tempting us, we must admit that evil does confront us. We all sin individually and participate in the corporate sins of this country, therefore bringing evil into this world.

I cannot answer the ultimate question of how you should respond to temptation. I can tell you how I personally respond and how the reformed tradition invites us to respond. When faced with a temptation - like wanting to hurt someone who hurt me - I call my sister and explain the situation. And most often that solves things for me. When faced with larger issues of temptation, I obviously need to talk it out further. I also like to journal to recognize patterns within my temptation. Overconsumption - whether it is overeating or using too much energy driving or in the house - is something I am tempted with daily. These problems require more than one conversation in order to heal them. At the end of the day, I must realize that I cannot overcome this temptation alone. Talking to the God of Love present within my sister is one way I lay my temptations down. Another way is through prayer and journaling. However, this is what I do and I invite everyone to find ways which help them overcome their personal temptations.

The reformed tradition invites us to trust in a loving, accepting, and empowering God. This God invites us to create good things in partnership with the Almighty. This God also invites us to be a living example of the Christ witnessed to in the New Testament. By being a living example we respond to evil by loving, we respond by making just decisions, we respond by admitting we cannot fight the battle by ourselves. We become active partners with God in creating God's Shalom on this earth. We recognize the power of the Trinitarian God - the power to create, the power to endure, the power to forgive, the power to love. Only through this power can we persevere in our grappling with temptation and evil. It is ultimately God - who shows Godself through relationship with others - who reminds us that we were created and called **good**. This God gently nudges us, asking us to go back to that time of creation when we were called good.

We respond to evil in whatever form it takes, by listening to this voice and realizing we were made to do good things, not evil. Ultimately we respond to evil by being the beloved creatures God intended us to be.