



Sunday February 22, 2026

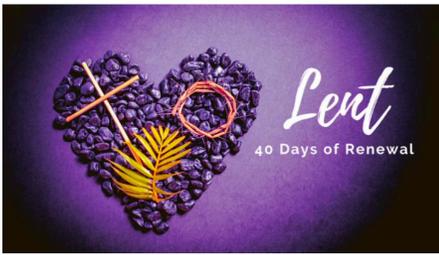
First Sunday in Lent

The devil made me do it, said Arne Cheyenne Johnson back in 1981. This was the first court case in the United States where the defense blamed the devil for convincing him to kill his landlord. The devil, as the co-defendant apparently got off the hook. Johnson was convicted of first-degree manslaughter and served five years and was the topic of a 2023 documentary, the devil on trial.

Anyone remember, like I do, this really dates me, from the early 1970s when comedian Flip Wilson who did make that comment, "Oh, the devil made me do it." And it became a household phrase because he worked it into his weekly acts, playing a sassy and liberated Southern woman who would explain away all her misdeeds with a nonchalant, "Oh, the devil made me do it."

Perhaps, though, maybe you've seen *The Conjuring*, the devil made me do it, a 2021 horror film actually based on the Johnson murder trial. So, if you have some insomnia on some night, you can stay up and watch the movie, and I hear there's already like four sequels in case that would keep you sleeping.

Every day, we have a devil on one shoulder, an angel on the other, both trying to influence our decisions. And as we begin our journey of Lent, it is important for us at the get-go to understand, temptation, and the presence of evil in our lives and all around us. We live in an age where people have various opinions about evil. We see evil's handy work in the conflicts and wars and ruptures, in some family fightings, in our churches sometimes when we disagree, and the lies that infiltrate our nation as truths or as justice. Even in the struggles of our very souls, in this modern era, some wonder is evil just an impersonal invisible force operating around us like gravity? Is it just a sad byproduct of human sin? Or is there an intelligent, cunning, spiritual being that



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deliberately seeks to create havoc and devastation wherever it goes, that glides in our suffering to obliterate the very image of God etched in us? Is it a combination of all that? Is it a combination of all these things? What do you think? However we slice it or dice it, evil is a part of our world. Explain it scientifically, psychologically, metaphorically or scripturally. The bottom line is that evil exists and temptation exists. Every day, we face choices of good or evil, bad or good, right or wrong. Every day, we have that devil on one shoulder, the angel on the other, trying to influence our actions. And in the season of Lent, you are now asked to become more conscious and alert to the temptation and presence of evil as it seeks to control our lives and control the streets on which we walk. Demonologists, those folks who studied the ways of the devil say that evil doesn't really want to look scary to it's like we see in the movies or in pictures and books. In fact, the devil wants to look the more respectable of that. That successful business person, that charismatic pastor, that outstanding citizen, those Jeffrey Epstein types, renowned politicians or CEOs who make friends with the rich and famous and create a world where resources are at their utter disposal. The ordinary church lady who, behind our back, excuse Venom or gossip. Whatever form evil takes, the results are the same, to destroy human relationships, to sever our connection to God by leading us into sin and rebellion, to break with each other and to crush that goodness that is within us. The devil seeks to reign as a counterfeit law, snaring us and chaining us, stirring up torment and disport especially under the guise of being righteous. The main intent of evil, it's not to frighten or spook people out, the devil goes for the jugular. It is simply and clearly destroyed. Destroy relationships, break human connection in all its

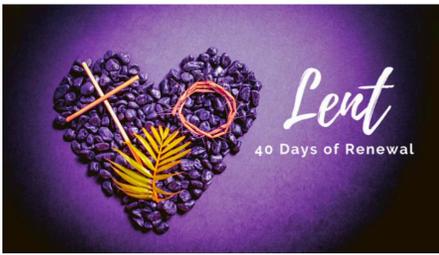


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forms. Evil seeks nothing less, but to mar that image that God has imprinted upon our soul.

In Genesis, we know that the devil disguised as the crafty serpent, began his work by asking Eve, how did this question? Did God say you could not eat from any tree in the garden? God actually says you may eat of every tree in the garden, but of the tree, the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat for from the day you eat it, you shall die. So, the devil, if you see, look at it, begins his temptation by twisting the truth. And searching for some doubt, trying to undermine God's authority and goodness. And Eve could have just easily corrected the devil and ended the temptation if she had quoted God's words as Jesus does. Bottom line is that Satan lies and contradicts God's command and plants that seed of rebellion that Eve should be like God. Eyes should be open to knowing good and evil. But look what happens. Eve suddenly sees the fruit as good instead of a danger. She sees the fruit as a delight, no longer something she should not even touch. Worse yet, she sees the fruit as a desire to make her wise. All these thoughts, the serpent manages to stir up in her mind with one simple little lie. And there are a couple of things we should note. The devil is clever, right? He approaches Eve when she is by herself, just like he approaches Jesus alone in the wilderness. It's an action of predators everywhere. Separate the person, the individual from the flock, from the group where there's strength and protection and attack them when they're a vulnerable. The devil waits until we are in our wilderness in a time of trial uncertainty and alone without support around us. From this vantage point, the devil plants the snare with the subtle, seemingly innocent questions in order to place ideas and thoughts that are contrary to the will of God. Did God say, "If you are the child of God"?



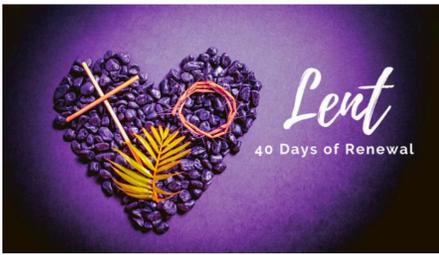
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The devil succeeds by carefully twisting the truth, very carefully appealing to human pride and weakness without our even knowing it, perverting the good, giving a distorted angle on the situation that opens the door to temptation for us.

And doesn't the devil tempt us in this way? The devil knows our faults employable better than we do. Maybe we don't want to be wise like Eve did, but maybe we want approval or acceptance. Maybe we just want to be loved. Maybe we want power, control or something in our lives. Maybe like Jesus, we are hungry for something. And the devil says, "Hey, why wait?" Maybe like Jesus, we have certain gifts from God. And the devil says, "It's for our own benefit." Like Jesus, we may have an amazing destiny and purpose and the devil says, "I can help you get there faster. I can give you the power and fame you deserve, or you could ever want."

The devil, we should note in this temptation of Jesus, can quote scripture along with the best of them. So, let's not be fooled, but be prepared. Remember this. Evil wants us to feel alone. Evil wants us to feel worthless and washed up. Defeated, evil will implant anger and pride and eat away at our souls to break. Until it breaks the loving connections we have to others, he wants to destroy the church and reduce the world to tears and rubble. And if he can't destroy you, he will seek to disarm you with feelings of being miserable and weak all the time. Temptation and evil are real things in our lives and they touch us every day. But so does the love and the mercy, forgiveness in the power of God. So, our task in Lent is to recognize an overcome temptation. Cling like we're clinging to Jesus, clinging to each other and clinging to the scriptures. Let not the cords of love that connect us to be broken. Together, we are better. Together, we are strong.



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Martin Luther tells us to laugh at the devil, to jeer at him and flaunt him. In the face of temptation and evil we are called to hold fast to good cheer. For remember scripture reassures us that greater is he that is in you than he who is of the world. Remember that verse. Etch it on our heart when temptation rears its head because that will help you and help us defeat temptation. And if we fall, remember the old saying, a saint is just a sinner who fell down but got up. And remember God does not ask us to be impressive, only faithful. God does not ask us to be invulnerable, only honest. And God does not ask us to hold the world together but only to trust the one who does. So, with the help of Jesus, let us get up, turn our back to the evil one and let the angels tend to us, leading us on the path of righteousness and goodness. Amen.