

OPENING:

*Well, the Devil went down to Georgia, he was looking for a soul to steal
He was in a bind, 'cause he was way behind, he was willing to make a deal*

So goes the opening of Charlie Daniels' 1979 hit "The Devil Went Down to Georgia"—the classic song where a young fiddle player named "Johnny" bests Satan himself in a fiddle-playing contest.

I love that song. I love the lyrics, I love the competing string instruments, I love the spiritual battle that happens: ...*a Fiddle of gold against your soul...*

I will admit, though, that, between the two, I have always liked the devil's fiddle performance better. No offense to Johnny, but let's *give the devil his due*.

And, if I were being honest, I might say same thing about our Gospel today, the devil again seems to have all the best lines.

The Devil has an intriguing set of enticements as he tempts Jesus, and Jesus fights back with.... Wait for it.... Deuteronomy.

In the 2000 years since, and today is the day of any day that we can admit it: we have been right there with the Devil, testing and tempting Jesus and God "Do something for earth's sake!..." we want to say... show us your power, take us up there with you. And send the devil back down where he belongs.¹

HOLY GEOGRAPHY

On this 1st Sunday of Lent, I would like to explore this idea of—

I am going to call it "Holy Geography"—

our spatial understanding of where we are in relation to God and to evil.

Here's how we usually talk about it:

Jesus up there in heaven,

the devil down there in Hell,

and us here at ground level, doing the best we can on our earthly pilgrimage.

We were reminded, on Ash Wednesday, that we are but dust, as low as you can go.

¹ Capon, Robert Farrar. 2002. *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids MI: W.B. Eerdmans. 35.

Today, we just endured the Great Litany,
and so you should feel pretty close to the ground.
BUT, we still yearn to rise, to stand up and prove ourselves.

This, despite us knowing the Greek myth of Icarus, who flew too close to the Sun,
and was burned for his hubris.

This, despite knowing the Old Testament story of the Tower of Babel, and how
human efforts to be like God was met with a reminder that we actually belong down
here on the ground.

This, despite knowing the famous modern-day legend, which is what Charlie
Daniels was working with, about Robert Johnson, an African-American blues
guitarist who was tempted at a crossroads in the Delta Mississippi. In exchange for
his soul, he got to reach the heights of musical genius.

English teachers call this a Faustian bargain, and it's indeed offered to Jesus as
well, and in Matthew it's an explicit geographic temptation.

There are three temptations, each higher than the last.

First he is led UP into the wilderness. Does not work.

Then the devil tries to take him to the "pinnacle of the temple", does not work.

Finally, the devil tries what Matthew refers to as an "exceedingly high mountain" to
tempt Jesus. And that does not work.

Matthew, by the way, LOVES mountains. We got the Sermon on the Mount, where
Jesus models what Moses did on a higher elevation, last week we heard Jesus get
Transfigured on a Mountain, and, when it is all said and done, after he is
resurrected, Matthew has Jesus appear to the disciples on a mountain.

What is going on with these changes of altitude?

It even cross over into abstract theology.

Matthew has a HIGH CHRISTOLOGY, where Jesus is commanding, serene,
ABOVE humanity. He shares that with the Gospel of John, where Jesus is said to
have started 10 feet off the ground and never goes below it.

Compare that to the LOW CHRISTOLOGY of Luke and Mark, where Jesus is
more human, more grounded.

GOSPEL

Back to our story, the Temptation (there's that word again) with it is that we see
ourselves as Jesus. We make a mistake in our Lenten journey by saying: Well Jesus
did it this way, let me try it. What's good for Jesus, must be good for us.

But Jesus does not even give us any helpful/ practical advice, no road map through this Holy Geography for Lent. You would think that at the very least he could have given us some Lenten disciplines, some tips on how to beat the devil. But it's a topsy turvy God we follow.

What if instead of spending these 40 days trying to figure out ways to climb, that we spent it in down in the dirt, making that fearless moral inventory, examining ourselves, wallowing a bit in who we are, while trusting that God can get us out.

We should be careful about any carefully planned ascents. In the song, *the devil went **down** to Georgia*, and to **us** because the devil knows we really want to come up.

The devil is really, ultimately, interested in our strengths.

Think of Faust, think of Icarus, think of scientific achievement of the Babel tower building corporation, think of Jesus and how the devil comes after him in our story.

Read C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* if you want to consider the insidious strategy of the devil, it's people on the up and up, who are the target.

God, though, actually is interested in our weaknesses.²

FALL

Consider the expression "Fall From Grace"—where we think about Lucifer, him being an angel who got too big for his britches, and so God kicked him out of heaven and down.

But that's not biblical, that's legend.

If you think about it: We don't Fall *from* grace, we fall *into* grace.

Grace is located in the dirt and dust and the muck, where the snakes crawl, and the sinners abound. Lent is a reminder to get in touch with that part of our life.

Here's another country music song:

Leanne Womack's "That's why they call it falling"

She is talking about Falling in Love.

And she is on to something, because you don't choose to fall in love.

That would be so sad. Imagine if falling in love meant climbing a ladder.

In fact, marriage rates are down because people consider it, more and more, to be the CAPSTONE of a relationship when you have gotten there, and not the CORNERSTONE from which you build.

² [The Brothers Zahl Episode 3: Evil \(fireside.fm\)](https://fireside.fm/episodes/the-brothers-zahl-episode-3-evil)

Instead, think about how we describe the most beautiful things in nature, a Snow Fall, a Water Fall, the Great Falls.

Even consider the expression to “Fall apart.” It sounds bad but it’s often accompanied with the honest admission that you are broken and it’s time for God’s grace to put you back together.

I heard somewhere it said, “I am a Christian because I need some place to fall apart.” And somewhere else that “Church is the only acceptable place to cry anymore.”

CONCLUSION

I am relentless optimist, by nature, so Lent is not really my thing. Give me Easter, give me Advent, give Ordinary Time where I have to remind people why we should keep singing.

This morning, I got in my car, cold and dark 7:00 am and turned on the radio, Guess what song is on? “Devil went down to Georgia.”

God is everywhere, even on 102.5 Winchester country radio!

But I will leave you on this note, I thought about saying this at my very first sermon to shock everyone but I have waited a full 11 months for whatever reason.

This was preaching advice about how to be with a new congregation and how to interact with them. It brings us back to our theme of Holy Geography, and little bit of that Lenten.

If you look out and see autonomous, **up**standing people who can make decisions. You will grow to despise them. Because they will disappoint them,

If you look out and see sinners and know yourself as a sinner. You will love them.

AMEN