

Sermon *The Deceiver is Still Speaking*
The Very Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 11.9.25

Job 19:23-27a

Psalms 17:1-9

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Luke 20:27-38

Have you ever been to Thessalonica? Someday, I hope to tour Greece. Thessalonica (now called Thessaloniki) is a town I'd like to see. It's a port city in the northeast corner of Greece with beautiful western views of the sunset over the Mediterranean. I bring this up because today we heard a reading of the second letter the Apostle Paul sent to the church in Thessalonica. He and Timothy, and some others, planted that church and then went to the city of Corinth (and yes, I'd like to visit that place too). While in Corinth, Paul wrote (at least) two letters to the Thessalonians because there were people trying to deceive this early and young church. Paul wrote them to first refute what the deceiver was saying and second to remind them to hold fast to what they have learned.

The first three characters mentioned in the Bible (besides God, of course) are Adam, Eve and the serpent. It was Eden; beautiful, life was good; but the serpent started asking questions, like, "Did God really tell you not to eat of this tree? Why? Can't you eat anything in the garden? What's God trying to hide from you? If you eat this fruit, won't you know things like how God does?" The third character in the Bible attempted to, and did, deceive the first two characters. One way to hear this story today is to ask ourselves this question: is the deceiver/serpent still speaking today?

So, let me ask you that question: do you think the deceiver is still speaking today?

Yeah, I think so too. It's not a talking snake; no, that'd be weird and no one would listen to it and would probably freaked people out; nope, the deceiver is speaking through a variety of other means. Let's look at one of the questions the deceiver is asking today – *can you really trust the Bible because it has been translated in many different languages over a long period of time*. Is it trustworthy?

Have you heard that question before? I have, a lot. Like most things the deceiver asks, there is a nugget of reality or truth in it. Yes, the Bible has been translated in many different languages. No other book in the history of the world has been translated into as many different languages as the Holy Bible. The Old Testament was originally written in (ancient) Hebrew. The New Testament was written in Greek. Unless you read either language, you'll need a translation. Church history shows that the Bible – both testaments – were translated into the Empire's language, Latin. Called the Vulgate, it was the primary source, solitary source throughout the Middle Ages. Some very brave reformers translated the Vulgate into English. Others translated it into German, French and Spanish. Some lost their lives for doing so (Latin was viewed as a holy language and couldn't be messed with) but the Reformation made it so that we now have the Bible translated into every known language on the planet.

The King James Version of the Bible is very popular. Written at the behest of King James of England (1566 – 1625) and completed in 1611, it was based on the Vulgate not the original languages. But James wanted the Bible to be poetic. I still think it's one of the finest works of poetry in English. It's also reliable and trustworthy. And it's viewed as poetry not as an eyewitness account.

Thanks to a variety of events shortly after WWII, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the like, the Bible was translated into English based on the original languages from the oldest scrolls known. What we have today is quite accurate and trustworthy as an English version of what was written a long time ago in an ancient language.

The Apostle Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians was written in the early fifties. ... no not the 1950s but in 0051 or 0052. Most historians date Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection to the spring of 0032. Within twenty years, the movement – called The Way – had spread from Jerusalem all the way to northeast Greece (and farther too). The message spread and started building churches and became prominent enough for the Deceiver to take notice and start undermining what the message was. It's astounding to think that the Messiah was crucified and less than twenty years later, the movement made it as far as it did. That's the power of the message and the Holy Spirit. Libraries and seminaries have copies of Paul's original letter. Those copies are remarkably uniform with each other. The Greek Paul used is a durable language that can be translated fairly easily into English. So, that's my answer of asking if the Bible is reliable.

What was the Deceiver saying to the people in the church of Thessalonica? It said the Day of the Lord had already come. They did not know about it because they were not chosen to know. God does not love them. They are not worthy.

Those are all lies. The deceiver's method was to say Paul wrote other letters (which he didn't). Others would say they heard the Holy Spirit say something counter to what Paul and Timothy had declared. Others said that Paul preached such-and-such which, of course, he did not. Paul wrote to them to hold fast to the teaching that he gave them and to ignore the other messages out there. He then went on to say the Day of the Lord has not yet come and when the Lord returns, we – the people – will be gathered together. He told them that they were chosen as the “first fruits for salvation” – not the only fruits for salvation. There is a big distinction between first and only. They are the first fruits so that they can continue the proclamation of forgiveness, grace and love of our Lord Jesus.

One way to read the verse one of chapter two, “As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here,” is this: *we will be gathered and he will arrive*. We believe that Jesus arrives, He is present, when we proclaim the Gospel, when we pray and ask, “Lord, hear our prayer”, and when we break the bread and share it. We believe that when two or three are gathered together, Christ will be in the midst of us. Keeping the faith, the teaching, the breaking of the bread, when the Day of the Lord arrives, we will be doing all those things. The deception is to say that none of that is true, or that the Lord has already come and we were not invited. But, our faith tradition says that when two or three are gathered, he is with us.

What is the Deceiver saying to us?

We are heading into the holiday season. Messages around the season will sound something like this: you can have a perfect Thanksgiving if you do this or that. You can give the perfect gift and they will love you even more. The larger messages we hear from the deceiver today are along the lines of if you want to be happy, have more money, or more things, or a faster car. If you buy new furniture and it doesn't make you happier, then buy more stuff until you feel better. How about this: your self-worth is based on how much stuff you have.

The Deceiver often says what he said to Adam and Eve which is this: you can have this AND that. Here's how it played out in the third chapter of Genesis. The serpent said they could be in relationship with God and each other AND they could eat of the tree that was forbidden. As it turned out, they lost their relationship with God, and with each other (they were ashamed, they hid, they covered themselves up from each other, they lied and made excuses).

For some, the Deceiver is saying that they can have one drink, they deserve it, and their life will remain as good as it is now. For some, that's a lie because it won't/can't stop at one drink and that will send their life into a downward spiral. For others, the Deceiver is saying that they can walk into a casino, have some fun, and their life will be just as good, if not better, than it is now. For those addicted to gambling, that's a lie because their life will not be as good as it was before. They cannot have this and that.

Here's a true story. The man in the story has given us permission to share it. In fact, he pleaded that it be shared so that others don't fall to the voice of the Deceiver like he did. Steve was 72 years old. He had just sold his successful insurance agency and was working on becoming an even better golfer. He had two children and three grandchildren. Life was very good. He was married for almost 50 years when the Deceiver said that the 38-year-old who had taken an interest in him wouldn't change his life at all. He could both have a girlfriend and be happily married. That was a lie. When the affair was discovered, he left his wife and rented an apartment. His children stopped talking to him and he was cut out of the life of his grandkids. His church was mad at him and supported his wife. But he still played golf.

He was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. His girlfriend left him. His golf buddies didn't come by. He was alone, in an in-patient hospice ward. The only one who visited him was the youth pastor the church (who was trying to get the grandkids to say goodbye to their grandfather). Steve looked at the pastor and said, "Tell others about this. You cannot have this and that. It's a lie."

The Deceiver, who spoke to Adam and Eve, who was misleading the Church of Thessalonica, and who deceived Steve, is still speaking. The good news is that we can discern what is the deceiver's voice and what is God's loving and supportive voice. Thanks to the Thessalonians, we have an example of turning to church leaders for help. We have the assurance that Paul gave them words that we can apply today to our lives. God loves us. God forgives us. God has chosen us to live a life worthy of his call and to help others along the path of salvation. When the Day of the Lord arrives, we will be gathered. It will be a day of rejoicing. And, if we pass before that day, the Lord, who forgives and loves, will gather us into his heavenly home.