

If I were to write a short story about putting a sermon together, it would have a protagonist – that would be me – and an antagonist – that would also be me.

It's always a battle. There's that moment during the week when what seems like a great idea related to the text pops into my head. In that moment, I can practically see the whole thing stretched out on the paper – from introduction to conclusion. But I don't write anything down.

Then, a day or two later, when I finally sit down to write that sermon, I encounter the barriers: potholes of fog, forgetfulness, diversions and detours that lead nowhere -- and my own uncertainty.

Sadly, these barriers accompany me all week long – until there is so little time left – that the fog lifts and I gather up the ideas I've been considering – and paste them together in the word document. My antagonist self has been attempting to strangle my protagonist self almost my whole life. It's a wonder they haven't been able to resolve their differences and move forward in harmony. But they haven't.

Fortunately, I am not alone in this. Every great story has its protagonist and antagonist – Harry Potter and

Voldemort; Alice in Wonderland and the Queen of Hearts. Abolitionist, Sojourner Truth – and the 19th century culture of white, male privilege. Every good story has at least one of each.

The Bible is full of characters playing these roles.

In this morning's first reading, that tale of Adam and Eve, God, the lead protagonist, has a dream of creating the Garden of Eden for the benefit of the man and the woman. The dream is unrealistic if God expects that the man and woman will behave just as God imagines. And if they had, they would have been set for life. They would never have to lift a finger. Every desire would be taken care of. Theirs would have been the life people dream of, even today. We want the whole world to be just, peaceful, and open to creativity for all.

Without an antagonist, however, there's no story to tell. Without some adversary it would just be a boring day after boring day. Good stories need antagonists to become interesting. They need barriers that must be crossed. They need temptations that must be resisted. They need a little disobedience and misunderstanding; and they often to point to a vision of a better world.

As protagonist, why would God, the loving, forgiving, all-knowing God, devise to put a good fruit tree in right in the center of the garden – and then tell people not to touch it? Was it a trap? Surely, God already understood the need for challenges in the story – the need for an antagonist.

God should have known the likely outcome of putting a tree there and forbidding Adam and Eve to eat from it. God even told them that it would open their eyes to the presence of good and evil -- and that they would one day die. What human would not want to see what God sees?

Once in that garden, of course you WANT that fruit! And you listen very naively when the serpent suggests that God won't mind if they take a small bite.

As a storyteller, you want that serpent to speak. You want to generate a challenge – and thus, a story. And humanity has been adding chapters to it forever.

In the Second reading, Jesus is the protagonist, but the devil is trying to divert him from his mission during those forty days in the wilderness.

The devil is like a cunning salesperson in a car dealership: “Tell you what I’m going to do, Jesus -- Go along with me on this, and I will give you an amazing opportunity.

So, Just go ahead and select one of these new super-powers right now, you’ll be able to feed all the people on the earth. They’ll all bow down to you. Angels will carry you when you jump off high buildings. It will be amazing! – if you just sign your life over to me before they’re all gone – and they can all be yours right away! What do you think? Is that something you want?”

Jesus noted that the offer had some fine print.

I don’t believe in a literal Satan or Devil, but I do know that every good story includes at least one larger-than-life antagonist. And I do take the presence of evil seriously. If you want, you could take the word, “evil,” and put a “D” in front of the word and call it “D’Evil.”

Satan it’s not just a Jewish or Christian figure; many religions and cultures have some antagonist figures that personified as “Demon,” “Destroyer,” “Adversary,” or “Spoiler.” Who wants to write a story with a protagonist who just starts out in with a plan and keep going until the destination is reached?

Recognizing and naming the antagonists in our own story, can be difficult. If you are surrounded by violence, you may have no understanding of peace. You need to name the antagonist if you want to defeat it.

This week, our world got pummeled by antagonists.

The Coronavirus, once isolated to a city in China, is now predicted to enter every region on earth.

The stock market had a near melt-down, carrying a threat to just about everything.

And America has become so divided politically, racially, economically, and socially -- that one side seldom hears or believes what the other side is saying. We can hardly contemplate a united journey ahead. These are true adversaries, and they will steer us off course, if we don't pay attention and keep our "eyes on the prize."

Religious communities reflect many of the same patterns. We are easily threatened, it seems. Fear of difference locks us up so we can't think. Old conversations run through our minds so that we can scarcely hear new ways of thinking. How easy it has been for religious clans to go to war, thinking of the other as evil.

In our Lenten journeys, would that we could all be able to see God through the fog.

Would that we could all break out of our inertia in time to be lively protagonists in our own stories.

Would that we could take another bite out of that forbidden fruit so that we, too, would have the knowledge to be the good for others, and to resist the labels that distort us.

This Church has been doing some pretty amazing things this past year. Something seems to have unlocked our hesitance to try things – to explore the horizon – to face uncertainty with faith. Individually, we may sometimes feel like we are alone in the story (a protagonist beset by an antagonist culture). But we never walk alone; new challenges are just waiting for our discovery. Jesus held to his single story line; he was not diverted by the devil.

Likewise, this is a great time to be the church. This is a moment for rebirth and new beginnings. But nobody else can walk this path for us. Nor do we have to walk it by ourselves! Where two or three of us are gathered together, Christ is in our midst. AMEN