Satan, Queen Bee

Sermon preached by Jennifer Hudson, St. Thomas' Episcopal Church, Bethel, CT, February 22, 2026; Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 and Matthew 4:1-11

Have you ever faced a bully? I remember the mean girls in school, which is probably why the 2004 film *Mean Girls* is a guilty pleasure of mine. The story follows sixteen-year-old Cady Heron as she gets sucked into a manipulative clique known as the Plastics at her new school. The clique is led by a ruthless queen bee named Regina who is described by one character as "evil in human form" because she is both cruel and controlling. But when the Plastics show interest in Cady and offer to let her into their exclusive group, Cady starts to change her behavior to fit in with their many rules. As she conforms, Cady begins to lose sight of her authentic self. She replaces Regina as queen bee, becoming just as spiteful. While I won't give away any spoilers, I will say that Cady's story demonstrates all that can go wrong when we operate from an ego-driven, or self-serving, place. Fortunately, we have stories like the one we heard this morning from Matthew concerning Jesus's resistance of temptation and pressure by Satan. But to understand the significance of Jesus's resistance against his bully we must first understand Adam and Eve's succumbing to it in the first lesson we heard from Genesis. I don't think we can look at one without looking at the other.

So whenever I read both stories, I tend to think of Satan as a queen bee or bully who pressures a classmate into doing something they're not supposed to do or compromising their personal integrity for the sake of fitting in or achieving greater status. Queen bees and bullies, after all, operate from a fragile ego and a deep sense of insecurity, and they try to get others to operate from the same space. It's easy to give in to their coaxing and pressure because of our basic human need to belong and to feel loved, accepted, and valued.

That's what happens with Adam and Eve. They're enjoying paradise and then this serpent slithers onto the stage. This serpent acts like any queen bee, putting pressure on Eve before caves and eats the fruit and then offers it to Adam. Adam and Eve give in to the serpent's coaxing because they want to be like God, which, as with Cady in *Mean Girls*, might spring from a sense of insecurity, of not being "good enough," and of not wanting to be the odd ones out. But instead of becoming like God, Adam and Eve realize their nakedness. They both realize their humanity which makes them different from God. And they feel shame because of that difference. What Adam and Eve don't realize is that they are beloved in God's eyes *because* they're different to God, because God created them, because God delights in them as the human beings they are. It's just as we heard in the opening collect on Ash Wednesday: God does not hate anything God has created. Unfortunately, Adam and Eve lose sight of their belovedness and compromise their integrity for the sake of not feeling different or less than.

Jesus, however, flips this narrative by humbling himself and surrendering his ego. He starts in the wilderness as opposed to a lush garden. He has also fasted for forty days and forty nights. He's famished as opposed to feasting on fruit. His strength is spent. He has literally and metaphorically emptied himself.

And here enters the tempter, our queen bee, but not in any specific identified form. Just Satan. Satan challenges Jesus with the words "*If* you are the Son of God" (Matt 4:3; Matt 4:6). Whoa! Talk about trying to damage Jesus's integrity and sense of self right away! It's the typical taunting we get from queen bees and bullies. Chip away at someone's sense of self and you can manipulate them as if they're putty. But Satan can't manipulate Jesus to turn the stones into bread. In a striking display of humility Jesus answers the challenge not with his own words but with Scripture, with "it is written," with a quote from Deuteronomy 8:3, when Moses reminds

the Israelites of God's provision in the wilderness. Jesus lets God speak rather than be the kind of ego-driven individual who needs to hear themselves talk.

Queen bee Satan keeps at it. He commands Jesus to throw himself down from the temple's pinnacle when he takes Jesus there. It's a great metaphor for how Satan wants Jesus to lower his standards, to stoop down to Satan's level, to give in to ego, because the ground is associated with the baser stuff of earth rather than spiritual ascension. And if that's not enough, Satan also mimics Jesus's reply "for it is written," then quotes parts of Psalm 91, leaving out the part about the angels' protection. This is all to undermine Jesus and his sense of self. But Jesus, girding his integrity, refuses to make a spectacle. He refuses to lower himself in any sense. He continues to let Deuteronomy do the talking.

I can only imagine Satan's frustration. I can imagine his need to haul out the proverbial big guns. He brings Jesus to a place of exaltation, a high mountain, a place where Satan will try to make Jesus go low again. This time Satan shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, their splendor. Next, he says he'll give them to Jesus, but only if Jesus bows down to him. If only Jesus recognizes Satan's in charge. If only Jesus recognizes that Satan's the queen bee.

This is the point at which I ask myself: is Satan really this foolish? Does he really think Jesus is going to fall for that? I mean, if Jesus has been resisting this long, if Jesus has demonstrated so far that he has no ostensible interest in baser concerns of the world, does Satan really think he can bribe Jesus with world domination?

But that's a queen bee for you. They start losing their mojo when they're resisted. And Satan has lost his altogether when Jesus commands him to leave. Jesus proves he can thrive where Adam and Eve failed because he refused to let ego drive him. He was never insecure. He already understood his belovedness and that understanding allowed him to be filled by the abundant and

free gift of the Father's grace. Through that grace, Jesus preserves his integrity and authentic self in the face of pressure.

Who are the queen bees and bullies in our lives who pressure us? Who are the queen bees and bullies who try to coax us into living in ways that aren't what God intends for us? Maybe they're world leaders. Maybe they're bosses or co-workers. Maybe they're classmates. Maybe we're queen bees and bullies to ourselves.

What would life look like if we really and truly understood our belovedness? What would life look like if we, like Jesus, emptied ourselves of ego-driven motivations and actions? What would like look like if we resisted the pressure or the need to fit in or prove ourselves worthy of love, admiration, or acceptance? What would our world look like if leaders of all kinds set aside self-serving agendas to better serve humanity and the common good? What would life look like if we embodied God's extravagant, unconditional love for us—just as we are, just as we've been created, no matter who we are, who we love, what we believe or doubt. How might understanding that we are already beloved enable us to preserve our integrity and move more authentically in the world?

Jesus shows us that when we live from that sense of belovedness, when our self-esteem is healthy, we are full of God's grace. We belong to God and that makes us more than enough.