

Lent 1, Year C
March 10, 2019
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When I read the opening sentence from today's Gospel it always gives me pause: **“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.”** Why, immediately following his baptism, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the affirming claim of being God's Beloved Son, would the Holy Spirit lead Jesus into the wilderness to face temptation? I can't help but hear the familiar words of the Lord's Prayer echoing in my ears, **“And lead us not into temptation.”** Jesus is the one who taught us that prayer and, given this peculiar set of circumstances, I can imagine why. Jesus is fully divine and fully human and therefore far better equipped to engage in witty repartee and biblical proof texting with the devil than I. Such an encounter is a daunting prospect. For Jesus this period of testing was not optional, though we literally pray that ours is. I appreciate the quip by Mother Teresa, **"I know God will not give me anything I can't handle. I just wish [God] didn't trust me so much."** While we hope that we can avoid being tested intentionally, we can also listen and learn from the model provided for us by Jesus.

In each of the three temptations the devil appears to use a technique often employed by con artists. The mark, in this case Jesus, would have to buy into the “hook” or premise that is offered. If the devil can get Jesus to accept the premise

of his temptation, then the devil can manipulate Jesus to get the response he wants. Let's look at the first one. The hook is reacting to the implication raised by the devil, "***If you are the Son of God***". Jesus had just been called "***my Son***" by God as he received the Holy Spirit as he was praying after his baptism. The temptation here is the need to prove it. Jesus does not engage the devil on the level of the temptation. Instead Jesus quotes Scripture. The second temptation is to make a legitimate offer without disclosing the consequences. Jesus could have earthly glory and authority, but only if he worships the devil. The temptation here is to obtain personal benefit through idolatry. Jesus refutes the sinful premise with another quote from Scripture. In the third temptation Satan shows that he is quick to adapt and uses Bible quotes in framing the next offer, this time encouraging Jesus to see the test as showcasing his trust in God. Once again Jesus declines the offer by quoting Scripture. Before you conclude that on this third strike the devil is out, just like in baseball, such is not the case. The devil never plays according to the rules. He didn't win this time, but like Arnold Schwarzenegger in *The Terminator*, he'll be back.

What are we to learn from this exchange? First, we need to remember to pay attention not only to the logic of something that is presented to us, but also to the emotional reaction we have to it. It sounds perfectly logical for a famished Jesus to create some food for himself. But that was not what the first temptation

was about. There is a subtle yet constant temptation for we humans to prove ourselves. God already knows who we are and what our value is. If we need to prove something to someone, it is likely not God. Second, the old saying, **‘If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is’** exists for a reason. If you find yourself caught up in the prospect of something amazing, it would be good to pause and get some perspective before committing. As author Tucker Max said, **“...the devil doesn't come dressed in a red cape and pointy horns. He comes as everything you've ever wished for....”** Good things do happen in life, and manna does come from heaven, but I also know that if someone offers me something because they say I am incredibly lucky, remarkable, smart, talented, or good looking, I need to take a step away and consider. God tends to draw us toward simplicity, humility, and service. Anything that stirs our desire for power, makes one's head swell, or promises something for nothing needs another look. It is also wise to ask to whom we will be indebted and how much. Third, we need to remember that the devil can quote Scripture just like Jesus can. Presenting temptation in the language of something good, helpful, or holy does not make it those things. Attempting to manipulate God to get our desired result is not a good or holy strategy.

Since everyone from Adam and Eve through Jesus onward has experienced temptation, we can anticipate that we will be tempted too. Even our Baptismal

Covenant prepares us for this fact by asking, **“Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, *whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?*”** The forms our temptations take might look similar in some areas and wildly different in others. The beer that calls to one person means nothing to me, but the chocolate does. Video games hold no appeal, but I can get lost for hours reading online articles. I have no interest in expensive cars or luxury homes, but I do love to travel. While there is nothing wrong with any of these things, we need to know what tempts us. Sometimes it is the small temptations that create a wedge in our relationships with God and each other. That is why the traditional Lenten disciplines call us back to the basic spiritual disciplines as listed in the Ash Wednesday service in *The Book of Common Prayer*: **“self-examination and repentance...prayer, fasting and self-denial...reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.”** Self-examination requires thoughtful reflection that allows us to identify our temptations and our tendency to indulge them. Repentance addresses our need to turn away from whatever it is that draws us away from God so that we can turn back toward God once again. Prayer allows us to turn our attention and energy to God on an ongoing basis. Fasting includes the well-known practice of “giving up” something for Lent, which could mean anything from particular foods or alcohol to a habit or activity. Reading the Bible familiarizes us

with the stories of God and how God interacts with people so that we might recognize God at work in our own lives.

Lent provides us with the opportunity to intentionally examine and address whatever needs attention in our spiritual lives. What is it that keeps us from being the loving, responsive, courageous, faithful people we hope to be? Author Anne Lamott writes:

A nun I know once told me she kept begging God to take her character defects away from her. After years of this prayer, God finally got back to her: I'm not going to take anything away from you, you have to give it to Me.

Lent is our invitation to hand it over, or to at least begin the process of giving it up. Even Jesus wasn't finished with temptation in a mere forty days. We are invited this Lent to follow the lead of Jesus and begin the process of letting go of whatever keeps us from the love of God. We have been given the tools we need, we have excellent company along the way, and we have a Savior who is uniquely suited to understand the challenge we face.

Amen