

## **FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT**

### **February 21, 2010 C**

Luke 4:1-13

We begin the season of Lent each year listening to one of the gospel accounts of Jesus' forty days in the desert. For the past few years, our Artist Guild has transformed our baptismal font (in the church) into a visual and tactile sign, pointing out that we, as a community of faith, are in a time of desert dryness. I noticed, for instance, on Ash Wednesday evening, one of the members of our parish automatically dip their fingers into the baptismal font expecting to touch water only to pull back in surprise when he felt the sand! The season of Lent is meant to prepare us for the renewal of our baptismal vows at Easter when we will once again pour water into the font in a spirit of rebirth, welcoming new members into Christ's household in Holy Baptism.

But that's forty-two days from now!

Luke tells us that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness of the desert where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. The temptations did not come from God. The temptations were waiting for him in the desert. And they came from 'the devil.' Jesus was tempted. And so are we. And we don't have to be famous or rich to fall into temptation. Temptation is part and parcel of our human condition. The challenge, it seems to me, is to know when we are being tempted and to know how to turn to God for the help we need. And that isn't always easy.

Luke also tells us: "when the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time." In other words, it didn't end for Jesus during those forty days. Jesus himself faced temptation throughout his life, right up to his dying hours. No wonder he tells his disciples, when they ask him how to pray, to say: "Lead us not into temptation."

It's not because God needs to hear it, but because we need to pray it.

I'd like to take a moment to say something about the Devil. And it is that many people in our contemporary society don't seem to believe in 'the devil' – at least not in the manner in which "the evil one" has been personified. And yet, we know all too well how real the power of evil is in our world. And, I suspect, if the truth be told, we all struggle with our own personal demons in ways we may not always recognize as demonic.

Peter Gomes, who for years served as the spiritual head of the Harvard community, writes about how we need to be vigilant when it comes to temptation in our lives – and why these forty days of Lent are so crucial for us as a time of self-examination and renewal. He writes: "The devil awaits that opportune time with us, that time when he can appeal to our injured pride, our wounded ego, our fear of not being appreciated, our anger at being ignored. These are the opportune times when the devil's persistence reaps great benefits. The devil's perseverance must be matched, however, by our own, and

such perseverance in the spiritual wilderness is what the Lenten discipline is all about. The struggle with evil in the world begins with the struggle with evil within ourselves...”

I’ve found through the years that it’s easier to give up something for Lent like chocolate or desert (or whatever pleasure we deprive ourselves of in a spirit of self-denial), than it is to do the more introspective work that might require of us a real change of attitude or heart or behavior.

Temptation rarely comes to us as an obvious decision between good and evil. More often than not, it comes disguised as something good or at least as something not very harmful. Listen to some illustrations of what I mean: “To ‘hedge’ a few line items on a tax return. To sleep with someone you know you are not supposed to. To gossip about another’s life – especially his or her problems. To engage in the telling of innocent ‘white lies.’ To take to drinking or drugging or overeating when you know these habits can dominate your life and lead to grave consequences. To keep silent when someone tells a racial or ethnic or sexist joke. To claim busyness when family or loved ones need you. To sell out your personal values to win in the ‘system.’ To hide behind ‘spirituality’ as a way of avoiding earthly responsibilities. The list is endless. The possibility of doing good can only exist in the context of its shadow reality: the capacity to miss the mark.”

And missing the mark is another way of speaking about sin. For the Greek word for ‘sin’ in the New Testament, ‘hamartia,’ means exactly that, to ‘miss the mark.’

The call to conversion these forty days of Lent is an invitation to discern what we need to work on in our lives? What do we need to take stock of? Are we able to name the evil we say ‘yes’ to resisting when we affirm our Baptismal Covenant? What hidden influences do we need to pay attention to in order to listen to the voice of God within our hearts?

In the midst of our trials and temptations, it is easy to forget something Jesus did not forget during his temptation in the desert, And that is God’s faithfulness. “You are my refuge and my stronghold, my God in whom I put my trust,” we read/chant in today’s psalm (91). Our patron, St. Paul, reminds us in his first letter to the Corinthians that “God is faithful, and God will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing God will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.”

We will, in just a short while, do once again what we do every Sunday, as together we will pray through, with and in Christ, the prayer he gave us as his disciples in which we say, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever.

Amen.

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