

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In today's Gospel reading for the First Sunday in Lent, we have the familiar story of the Temptation of Jesus as it is told in Matthew's gospel account. The story is repeated in Luke and Mark. And the overall point here is that Jesus knows he is *dependent upon God, not himself*, for life and identity. The devil, on the other hand, represents *self-indulgence* – that is, a *self*-distinguishing and *self*-serving religious identity. So, **self (represented by the devil)** is juxtaposed here with a **life centered in God (as represented by Jesus)**. Jesus has already been declared Son of God and Messiah or Anointed One; this occurred at his baptism. Now he is being asked to display his identity in self-centered terms, but this would undermine his identity as the Son relying on gifts from the Father.

As would have been true for any son at the time, the identity of Jesus was bound up with his family's honor and status. Jesus, however, does not need to obtain these things by giving in to the temptations of the devil, so things will not go well for his tempter.

And who is this *tempter* we're dealing with in Luke 4? He is called *Satan* in Hebrew and the *devil* in Greek, and he is found throughout scripture where he appears to grow in hostility to God and in influence and power over the Almighty. As the "adversary" – another term applied to him – his role was to uncover weakness in humans who were very highly regarded by God. He becomes increasingly hostile and harmful in the later tradition, interfering with God's relationship with Israel through temptation, through accusation before God and through disruption of the chain of events in Hebrew history.

Over time, the adversary's identity shifted from a kind of employee of God to his primary competitor. We believe this occurred through Persian influence on Judaism, because in their belief system history was viewed as a cosmic struggle between good (or light) and evil (or darkness). Thus, Satan is usually associated with the serpent in the Garden, with an ancient dragon, with an angel ejected from heaven, and with our own impulses to do evil. The gospel writers tended to see their own time as a showdown between God and Satan, so we need to view the temptation in the wilderness through this lens.

If what saved Jesus in his combat with the tempter was his assurance and absolute trust in God, his complete dependence upon the Father, it allows us to more easily see that there is a strong link between trust and temptation.

The best way to put this in terms of today's reading is this: to the extent that we allow our natural insecurity to lead us to mistrust God, we become open to the possibility, indeed the temptation, of believing that ultimately it is all up to us, that God does not provide, that we are better off trusting in ourselves. And that way lies the abyss! Remember that Jesus triumphed over the Tempter precisely through his unwavering faith in God, his reliance upon him, and his sense of complete dependence. No matter how hard it may be to adhere to this ideal, the lesson of scripture is that this is where our hearts

should always be. In the words of the daily office in the suffrages of Evening Prayer, “only in you can we live in safety.”

So, how do we obtain that assurance? How do we become faithful? How do we gain a sense of dependence? There are no simple answers, but there are some time-tested ones...:

...we can pray; we can participate in the sacraments; we can study scripture, we can adopt a spiritual discipline and incorporate it into our lives. But mostly, we can depend upon one another. We need the support of others to sustain our own faith. We need the company of our fellow pilgrims. It is only in this way that we can grow in trust and live out our lives with a sense of abundance rather than scarcity, because scarcity always breeds fear, and fear leads us far from God.

As the prayer book rubrics explain, on Ash Wednesday the priest is called to issue the following invitation: “I invite you...in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s Holy Word.”

May these 40 days in 2020 be a blessed season for you and bring you the peace of God.

Almighty God, ...come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.