

The First Sunday in Lent February 21, 2021 St. Alban's Staten Island

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

On the first Sunday in Lent, the topic of the gospel lesson is always the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Although in Year A, we read Mark's version, today I'm switching to the Luke version (which is the appointed version for Year C) because it is so much more expansive and thus filled with more opportunity for understanding the event in the full context of the life and ministry of Jesus.

In today's lesson from Luke, Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit after his baptism into the wilderness. The actual place likely refers to:

The **Judaeen Desert** located in Israel and the West Bank, lying east of Jerusalem and descending to the Dead Sea.

The wilderness in Jewish tradition is a place of spiritual challenge and refreshment. A place where adversity can challenge authenticity, and that is precisely what is happening here. It is also the place where Israel was born, in the Exodus from Egypt. We are not privy to an actual conversation here but more an imagined one – a kind of conversation in the head of Jesus. The devil is not really pure evil. It would be fairer to say that he is the ego itself and represents its desires. But that still makes him the perfect figure to challenge Jesus, because our desires are powerful forces.

Ordinarily it would take a great deal to overcome the need to follow a desire. But Jesus keeps to God's commands here and then uses passages from Deuteronomy to point up Israel's failure so that he can demonstrate what is required to succeed.

The *Temptation* story is taken from Luke 4...

...which is a justice text, especially as told by the evangelist. It defines divine justice quite concretely, indicating that Jesus is not merely God's way of being in the world, but Jesus is God's way of ruling the world. It is Jesus who fulfills the law and the prophets by enacting God's standards for justice, which the law and the prophets revealed.

The narrative occurs at an important juncture in Luke's biography of Jesus. Luke is going to great pains to establish Jesus' identity before his public ministry. In addition to an expansive birth narrative, Luke gives us John the Baptist pointing to Jesus, the baptism itself and God's declaration of Jesus as "beloved Son", and Jesus' genealogy. The final step before the inauguration of his public ministry will be an encounter with the devil himself.

The story is often called the "temptation of Jesus," but the Greek word *pairazo* may mean "test" as well as "tempt." Great heroes traditionally undergo a period of testing. From the Greek hero, Ulysses, on down to the star of the last movie you've seen, the hero of the story is tested with a time of trial.

And the reason Luke provides such an expansive commentary is that he is claiming world-historical importance for this testing of Jesus. In doing so, he also establishes the status of Jesus as fully human. Thus, when he is tempted in the wilderness, it is to demonstrate once again that as a fully human being, Jesus had to undergo this kind of testing by the devil --- the same kind of testing we are all subject to. If he is not tempted, he cannot be truly human.

But if we now know him to be fully human, we also recall that he is the beloved Son of God in whom the Father takes pleasure and pride. But therein lies a great unknown: left open is the question of *the kind of Messiah* Jesus intends to be. We learn something about his answer to that question in this episode.

Luke wants to connect the *Temptation of Christ* with his earlier Baptism. He does this by placing the two scenes or events in sequence and in similarity of treatment so that they can be viewed as being equal in importance. Thus, what happens in the wilderness is no less filled with the divine presence than that moment when the dove of peace descended from heaven to announce the blessing of God. God is as present with him in the temptation as he had been at the more exalted experience of baptism.

Luke is a "master story-teller," so it is not only interesting but a tribute to his writing skill that in this scene we hear echoes of Adam and Eve in the Garden being tempted by the serpent. Indeed, we also hear echoes of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness in the Exodus, grumbling for bread, forgetting the grace of God which liberated them from slavery, experiencing temptation, flirting with the worship of many gods and engaging in idolatry.

Luke needs to establish that not only is Jesus fully human, he is also the Son of the Living God. And he must do this because this Jesus is not going to be the kind of Messiah most Jews were anticipating. Confusion over this will create misunderstanding, anger, resentment, and shattered expectations. And this will be amply demonstrated when the religious authorities turn against him and condemn him to an excruciating death on the cross to show the world how little faith they have in this self-proclaimed prophet and Anointed One.

Generally speaking, the devil does not entice Jesus with great evils but with good things for the wrong reasons. Certainly, in this instance the devil tempts Jesus with things which on the surface appear to be good while upon further examination that initial appeal is undermined by the recognition that one is being conned.

Jesus knows that the only way he can defeat the devil is on the most personal and intimate level possible. So, there is a kind of repartee between the two figures which demonstrates how alluring the message of the devil can be. Jesus doesn't argue with him. Instead, he quotes scripture with which it is not really possible to take exception in the same way one might do with a simple argument.

In fact, it is quite unusual to find these two combatants quoting scripture to one another; it marks this as a singular episode in the New Testament. As I mentioned a moment ago, Jesus is determined to succeed where Israel failed, so he must be crafty. Naturally, attending to one's hunger is natural and essential, but Jesus also needs to show that loyalty to God is more important. If Jesus is truly going to rule as God's anointed one, he needs his own pathway there: and Jesus will show that he intends to be the kind of Messiah who leads through humble service to others. And Jesus obviously has power, the kind that heals and calms the waters and drives evil away. But that power is not something he should be using simply to demonstrate divine energy. Rather, it is meant to be used to restore others to life and strength.

If Jesus chooses the path of political power and success, he will play right into the devil's hands. By choosing the way of suffering, humiliation and death he will confuse and mystify his followers but will be true to his mission. When the devil takes Jesus up to the pinnacle of the Temple and asks him to demonstrate his godly powers, we --- likewise --- are being exposed to a test just as Jesus is, because perhaps the most basic of all sins is claiming equality with God. As St. Paul said, "though Jesus was in the form of God, (he) did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

We were not created to be gods but to live in obedience to the Creator. And Jesus who could have laid claim to the power of God by throwing himself down from the pinnacle did not do so because he did not count equality with God as a thing to be exploited.

In his answers to the questions posed by the devil, Jesus tells us what kind of prophet and anointed one he will be. Having beaten his foe in this battle of wills, Jesus can now begin his public ministry knowing he can face any challenge that comes his way.

We are not offered specific instructions here on how to proceed in life from an ethically pure stance. But the story of the temptation of Christ does show us the perennial challenges all of us face as followers of Jesus: "the temptations to forget one's baptismal identity, to attempt to use one's religion for personal gain, to try to be successful rather than faithful, to be dazzled by the riches of the world, to make compromises where one is called to stand firm, and to avoid the path of sacrifice and suffering."

There are two competing story lines here. The devil offers one characterized by self-indulgence, self-aggrandizement and self-serving religious identity. Meanwhile Jesus responds with quotations from the Old Testament that show awareness of the true source of life and identity, his reliance on God, and his

understanding of God's character. These answers are rooted in an underlying narrative that he is dependent on God rather than self for life, glory, and identity.

The devil directs his temptations at the heart of Jesus' identity. For example, he says "if you are the Son of God" --- which is followed by a challenge to prove his identity with a miraculous display such as turning a stone into bread.

But Jesus doesn't have to prove his identity to anyone. Luke shows us that It has already been confirmed by Mary, Elizabeth, Simeon, Anna, John the Baptist, and the genealogy in Luke 3. It is interesting to note that in antiquity an adult son was understood to be the father's representative; the father and the son worked together to accomplish family goals. The son's identity, honor, and status were rooted in the family's honor and status. So, using this analogy we can see that Jesus had no reason to gain these things by giving in to the devil's temptations. Thus, the story rightly arises out of the social context in which Jesus lived and in which he conducted his public ministry.

Christ has been revealed to us throughout the Epiphany season. We know his identity. He has been tested; adversity has challenged authenticity, and authenticity has won the day so that our Lord is now ready to undertake his public ministry, so it is a fitting moment to begin our begin the season of Lent. In the words of the prayer book: **"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."**

Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: 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 forever. Amen.

Sources

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