

Sermon for First Sunday in Lent Year C

[RCL] Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

Driven by the Spirit

It is the first Sunday in Lent and it seems as if Advent was just a few days ago. During Advent and Christmas we were confronted with the scandal of the incarnation: the wondrous and terrifying news that God entered our humanity in a specific place, at a designated time, in the form of a particular man – Jesus of Nazareth. We hardly had time to catch our breath when Epiphany arrived and we watched with wonder as the reality of Incarnation was acknowledged by the wise of this world, the magi, and by the unorthodox within the religious community, John of the wilderness, John the baptizer. We stood in awe as Jesus emerged from the waters of the river to hear the words that would set him apart while at the same time plunging him into the sufferings and joys of daily living: the words uttered at his baptism, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

How can one hear these words and not feel frightened or ready to run away? The evangelists tell us that Jesus decides to withdraw for a while. He goes to the wilderness to think upon these words and their meaning, as they would affect the rest of his life. We know almost nothing of his previous years, but it is obvious at his baptism that he had spent them obeying and acting upon the will of God. Otherwise, those crucial words would not have been uttered: “with you I am well pleased.” So we come to the great temptations in the wilderness, the beginning of both his ministry and the start of the road that would lead to crucifixion. Matthew and Luke tell us that the Spirit led Jesus to the wilderness. Mark, who in his usual laconic manner uses only two verses to describe the experience, says: “the Spirit immediately *drove him* out into the wilderness.”

Now, we enter Lent with a strong awareness of the incarnation, of the full humanity of Jesus. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews testifies that Jesus was tempted in every way just as we are. The vivid metaphors of those days in the wilderness show that he was tempted in the most intense manner possible. “He emptied himself,” St. Paul wrote to the Philippians, “taking the form of the slave.” Jesus responds to the most powerful temptations that can be aimed at a human being by taking the form of a slave.

We don’t know exactly what span of time forty days actually means because this number is so common in the writings of the times and so imbedded in the Hebrew stories. Obviously, it was a considerable span of fasting and of profound thinking and wrestling. The evangelist tells us that at the end of the fasting period he was “famished.” In that weakened state he is offered the temptation of using his exceptional powers for magic and for his own benefit. “Turn this stone into bread, come on. It’s easy for you. You are not like everybody else. You can use your remarkable powers to help yourself.”

A person who is starving will do anything to relieve the pangs of hunger. Those who have more than enough to eat find it very difficult to understand the urgency of this need. Starvation is

overwhelming because it is life threatening. Jesus turns temptation on its head by using the scriptures he must have memorized during the years of his preparation for ministry. “One does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” What good does it do us to take care only of the body and to forget to feed on God’s words? The second part of the verse quoted is often neglected; it is important for us to remember that Jesus never neglected it.

How useful it is to be immersed in the words that sustained Jesus. How much would we be helped if we memorized enough of the Bible to sustain us in times of trouble and temptation? The pattern of his ministry emerges: in each instance he rejects the easy way, the magic, if you will, by feeding on the words of the holy scriptures that he understood so fully.

The second temptation is one that every politician today would fail miserably: the chance to be given authority and power in exchange for worshipping power, greed, human pride and arrogance. The culture of the developed world worships money and guns. It is a culture passionately adopted by those who long for similar power. Someone once suggested that the money spent on one airplane intended for war would educate every college student in America for years to come. If this isn’t idolatry, it’s hard to figure out what this temptation means. We see people selling their souls for power while children are shot, starved, made sick by contaminated water, or drowned in the seas while their families try to escape bombing and destruction. The list of offenses is unending but the answer that Jesus provides takes us back to the original commandment to worship the one God, the Creator. Imagine a world where the leaders prayed constantly, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Following the wilderness, Jesus would spend the rest of his short life turning aside from all temptations to put his self first. Even when someone calls him good he says, “No one is good but the Father.” At every instance of living he was connected to his father by prayer, and because of that he did not falter. People marvel at Jesus’ authority, but he knew that he acted on God’s authority.

The third temptation is even more intriguing because the Tempter, Satan, the Devil, whichever name you prefer for the power that opposes God, this tempter uses Scripture to accomplish his purpose. Listen to the pundits and the false prophets, to those who make money by taking advantage of the poor, listen to them and hear how they too use Scripture to accomplish their dark purposes. “Take a chance with your life,” the tempter says to Jesus. “No matter what chances you take, God is supposed to take care of you. You are a favorite of God’s, aren’t you?” There is in all of us a tendency to bargain with God and a great temptation to misuse scripture for our own purposes. Out of such misuse wars have arisen. Jesus is adamant on this: You shall not put your God to the test.

Both Matthew and Luke agree that when, finally, the terrible temptations were finished and the tempter left him alone he did so only for a while. “Until an opportune time,” Luke writes. Because of the incarnation, Jesus would be tempted again. There is that heart-breaking time when Peter tries to dissuade him from following the road that would lead to his death. After all, the tradition did not say anything about Messiah suffering and dying! But Jesus hears in Peter’s rebuke, the echo of Satan’s temptation: “I have the authority, I will give it to you.” Once again Jesus turns away from the temptation, and from his good friend, knowing that his own way of obedience to God would lead to his early death.

This is how the season of Lent begins, with the victory of Jesus over temptation. The knowledge that he belongs to God and to God alone keeps him from succumbing to any thought that he might rely on his own powers alone. The knowledge of Scriptures, of the words of the Lord, as Jesus describes them, becomes a shield to protect him from the meddling of the tempter. Jesus' connection is never torn because, in prayer, he always turns to God. May it be so with us.

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