

First Sunday of Lent year A

Matthew 4:1-11

How striking: for the first Sunday of Lent, the *temptations* of Christ in the desert. Moreover, they are paralleled with the temptations of Adam and Eve!

Is this supposed to be some sort of ominous forewarning for us regarding Lent?

Gee thanks! Can't wait.

We can perhaps reasonably state that, in the desert, i.e. *when we choose to be alone w/ and adore God*,

- temptation lurks.
- a Tempter, who does not want us to experience intimacy w/ the Divine, lurks.

St. Hilary (301-368) says:

“The temptations of the devil assail those principally who are sanctified, for he desires, above all, to overcome the holy.”

The “desert” implies a holy intent and thus intimacy and thus holiness.

The temptations of Christ occur:

- immediately after His Baptism
- immediately after being publicly revealed as the Beloved of the Father

Jesus goes to the desert – as the passage says, led by the Spirit, *to be tempted by the devil*.

Was it a deliberate sparring match or bizarre fun?

Did the Holy Spirit think, “Jesus has been sitting around the house for 30 years;

He needs to be shaken into activity; nothing like some good old temptations”.

Jesus goes *for us*.

Why does He go for us?

St. Gregory (540-604) says,

“It was not unworthy of our Redeemer to wish to be tempted, who came also to be slain; *in order that by His temptations He might conquer our temptations*, just as by His death He overcame our death.”

Before the actual temptation, however, there are 40 days of fasting.

“Afterwards (Matthew specifies), Jesus was hungry.” (verse 2)

Duh! – for me it would have led to *death*, or at least insanity!

It is a seemingly unnecessary, almost silly detail; but no details are insignificant.

The prior fasting is also an important detail. It shows at least three things:

1. Fasting strengthens, and is, therefore, a good arm against temptation.
2. Fasting does not eliminate temptation.
3. The resulting hunger made the devil more comfortable to approach Jesus, probably making him think he had something of an upper hand.

What *are* temptations?

Temptations are *un*-loving possibilities that present themselves, and, if pursued, can, because they are unloving, lead us astray from

- our purpose which is God *and thus*
- our true selves

What are the specific temptations that Jesus experiences (*from without*)?

Notice the interesting parallel with the temptations of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:6).

The order is not exactly the same, but Eve notices three things about the tree:

1. “*Command these stones to become bread.*”

Otherwise put, “You’re hungry. Indulge. Use your godly power to satisfy yourself.”

(“The woman saw that the tree was good for food.”)

gluttony

2. “*Throw yourself down from here.*” (FYI: a drop of over 300 feet...)

Otherwise put, “You can rise above everything. Even God will follow your initiatives.”

(“The woman saw that the tree was desirable for gaining wisdom.”)

pride/power

3. “*All this I shall give to you.*”

Otherwise put,

“All this will be in submission to you. And you will be the center of attention.”

(“The woman saw that the tree was pleasing to the eyes.”)

vanity

I propose these as *one* interpretation,

i.e., that it can be discerned that the devil is tempting Jesus to these

(in addition to greed and idolatry and other things).

These three temptations are also *our* temptations,

and to them, somehow, are perhaps connected all temptations.

Saint John, in his first letter (2:16), speaks of these three principal selfish struggles of ours.

How interesting.

The devil promotes, “me, me, me”. “Go for it. You can and ought to be the center.”

And Jesus responds, “Him, Him, Him.”

The devil invites us to turn towards self.

Jesus invites us to turn towards God.

“Do you wish to be free? Do you wish to disentangle yourself?

‘Him, Him, Him.’

i.e., “Turn to your Maker, the source of all love, and you will be free.

You have been made to love, and the truest freedom *follows* love.”

Jesus simply points to God.

Moreover, He simply quotes scripture, as if to say to us,

“Never dialogue with evil. If you do, you will

1. waste your time
2. probably lose.”

Now, these three temptations are three forms of selfishness, even though they are things which are fundamentally good in due proportion: *delight, autonomy, and healthy self-love* gone wild become *gluttony, pride, and vanity*.

In other words, they become: “me, me, me”.

These three temptations are things with which we all struggle (from without and within) and of which we must become aware.

We all struggle, in different ways, to curb excessive preoccupation with *pleasure and looks and reputation and control* and... n'est-ce pas?

And we live in a world that plays upon these vulnerabilities –

which is why advertisements can sometimes be cruel.

Think of the many sleek ads you see each day, and the outrageous promises they make.

Speaking of advertisements,

I can recall two, very clever billboards I once saw in Texas (the land of billboards):

1. for Burger King

“**Obey your hunger.**”

2. for no particular company

“**Smoke**”

--- **Satan**” ...ouch!

These three temptations are things which pose ongoing, challenging questions, for example,

- Where do we draw the line with pleasure, so that it not numb us to the more sublime and the divine, not to mention the needs of those around us?
- When does healthy self-reliance begin to negate my trust in God who knows best and wishes to be my primary Care-Giver?
- When does hygiene and enhancement of beauty become vanity?

What are we to do?

Although not a hot item on the market, *virtue* is a start: temperance and justice...

But virtue is not enough.

We must *surrender* to God,

- granting Him the opportunity to satisfy us
- humbly trusting Him
- worshipping Him

Jesus tells us that beyond virtue, in God, we find not only strength, but something greater than that which tempts us:

- Greater than bread, i.e., chocolate and beer and jewels and sex:
God Who satisfies the heart.
- Greater than power control:
God omnipotent and omniscient Who carries me.
- Greater than fame and glory:
God Who sees me as I truly am and Who welcomes me.

We are given this gospel at the *beginning* of Lent as more than a forewarning.

It is a source of hope. It is a resounding reminder that the victory has already been won.

Jesus has conquered our temptations, meaning that,
if we do not want, they are not obstacles to God.

We need not fear.

There is a *real* battle. There is an effort to be made.

But, we fight the battle knowing that Jesus has already won.

Our primary effort then is to abide in Him, the Victor.

He is our victory and our refuge and our place of rest.

If temptations are things contrary to love,

and if Jesus “was tempted in all things like us, save sin” (Heb 4:15),

then, when we are tempted not to love truly, Jesus is right there with us.

We can, therefore, love through all things.

Lent is indeed a season of hope...