

1st Sunday Lent Year "C"

March 9-10, 2019

Readings: Deuteronomy 26: 4-10; Romans 10: 8-13; Luke 4:1-13

The readings for the first Sunday of Lent, in all three of the cycles (Matthew, Mark, and this year in Luke) focus on the account of Jesus' temptation by the devil. It is the classic biblical scene of Good vs. Evil outside of the Garden of Eden. It contains so many elements and facets of the nature of temptation, any of which could be our own experience. In other words, it is not really too much of a stretch for us to see in these temptations a mirror of our own lives. Jesus is tempted:

- physically to satiate his hunger in the midst of his fast.
- emotionally to satisfy the human desire for power and glory.
- spiritually - demonstrates the depth of his relationship to the Father.

Physically, emotionally, spiritually—all the essential ways in which we are tempted, and Jesus knew them, but with one major difference. Jesus did not give into temptation; each time, he called upon his own relationship with the Father to re-commit himself to his mission. We do a disservice to the human nature of Jesus if we see these temptations merely as play acting—as if Jesus knew all along that the devil had no power and was not in the least afraid of him.

Do you fear evil in the world and in your own life? Do you see the devil as an innocuous cartoon figure holding a pitchfork? Its reality is much more subtle than that.

In the epic 2004 film “The Passion of the Christ,” an often-overlooked scene highlights the masterful way in which the director weaves the presence of evil through the person of the devil. The androgynous hooded figure, devoid of hair or eyebrows, lingers in the background, as the film opens in the Garden of Gethsemane. I have never seen evil depicted in such a manner.

At times, the figure may be seen walking in a different direction from the crowd, moving ever so smoothly, almost gracefully with eyes that stare you down. It gave audiences a new appreciation for the mysterious manner in which evil comes into in the world and in our hearts. It is the portrait of evil that plants seeds of doubt in one's mind, and then waits, lurking in the background to see what will happen next.

I believe that is how most of us experience the temptation towards evil in our lives: enticing, inviting, second-guessing, torn between choices of the head and heart, and so on. This is why Jesus' response is so vitally important and instructive for us.

In the first instance, Jesus takes refuge in the classic sense of argument. He responds to the invitation challenging his miraculous powers by quoting Scripture right back to the devil. It specifically says, "Jesus answered him, 'It is written, *One does not live on bread alone.*'" To me this connotes a deliberate, confident answer from a perspective of strength.

In the second instance, Scripture is quoted again to highlight the fact that the Lord God must occupy an absolute central place in our lives, not a tangential one. Notice, the devil led Jesus up to see the views of all the kingdoms that could be his. It was a *worldly* temptation, by showing him something good that could all be his.

We are told that Jesus said to him in reply, "You shall worship the Lord your God; him alone shall you serve." It might be valuable to repeat these words as a prayer, to remind us of these basic truths. Him alone we serve and others as a loving response to Him.

In the third and final instance, the devil takes up to quoting Scripture again; he obviously has not learned his lesson. Jesus is tempted by the devil to rebel against God, quite overtly in the third case, even if more subtly in the first two.¹

¹ See footnotes to the New American Bible, referenced in Matthew 4:1-11.

This final response from Jesus is the strongest because the devil speaks of testing God himself. The now familiar “If you are the Son of God,” is met with a response taken from the Book of Deuteronomy, “It also says, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’” The implication is clear. Jesus is telling the devil: “I know who I am, do you?”

Perhaps what is most troubling about the whole account is left for the final line. The good ending is tempered by simply recounting, “when the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him for a time.” It isn’t over, it will happen again. We have been given fair warning.

We are going to have to deal with temptation of one sort or another for a long, long time to come. While the nature of the temptation will change with age, its presence will continue.

We must remember that we have the tools necessary to shun the temptations of the evil one, if only we use them. We are not slaves to evil; we are not powerless against it. The blood of the Cross has washed us clean and gives us the strength to carry on.

As we begin this year’s Lenten journey through the desert of our own weaknesses, if we but follow the path to the glory of the Cross, therein we will find the grace necessary to refresh and renew our thirst. Let us support one another in this journey, together, following the path set out for us by our Lord, leading us to our true and eternal home.