

LENT ONE, YEAR B, FEBRUARY 21, 2021

Does anyone know what is missing from today's Gospel reading about Jesus going into the dessert and being tempted by Satan? Let me read the first two verses again.

"And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."

What is missing are the temptations that both Matthew and Luke distinctly chronicle with great drama in their gospel accounts. In those versions we have Jesus having a conversation with Satan who tempts him with "turning stones into bread, throwing himself off the temple to test God, and bowing down and worshipping Satan."

Mark's story is sparse by comparison with what is written later in Matthew and Luke. As you heard, the writer of Mark doesn't even describe exactly what temptations Jesus encountered in the wilderness. But I don't think Mark's version is any less powerful for what he doesn't say. What goes on in the desert in Mark's story is only hinted at. That's one of the nice things about Mark's gospel - he leaves a lot to the imagination. So, in a way, we can fill in our own details.

Since Mark leaves the matter to our imaginations, I'm sure the people who heard it for the first time imagined what those temptations were so we too can indulge in our own ideas. First of all, the church has always looked at the temptations listed in Matthew and Luke as involving power and authority and control but what if the reverse was true. Imagine with me for a moment if Jesus' greatest temptation was not about his asserting his power but rather not claiming his power? Could he not have been tempted to forego his true mission as God had called him too and opt instead for marriage and family and anonymity and all the comforts which that brings?

Perhaps the real temptation of Jesus was to be a nobody. Perhaps what he fought so long and hard in the wilderness was the temptation to take it easy, to be less than what he was called to be. Now that's a temptation we can all understand.

How often are we tempted to be less than who we are? Sometimes our self esteem and sense of self worth is so low we fail to see what our gifts are. We fail to recognize what we can do and we hesitate to utilize our intelligence to its greatest capacity.

But probably the greatest temptation we face daily is to be less of a Christian. We are tempted not to fully live into being a Christian. We are even tempted to keep our identity as a Christian something secret for a lot of reasons. I know a lot of us have grown up believing that you should never talk about religion or politics. Ask yourself when was the last time you invited someone to attend church (virtually at this point) or to talk about their faith or spiritual life with you? When was the last time you spoke up when you heard a bigoted, prejudicial, hateful remark or joke thrown at someone because of the color of their skin, their ethnicity, gender or their sexuality. When was the last time you felt compelled to question what you grew up believing and embraced what Jesus really taught about love and inclusivity? That's why I believe we are tempted to be less of a Christian than we are called to be because we are so often afraid to speak up and speak out.

Being a Christian is not something we do just on Sunday. It is not something we discard the moment we complete our Sunday worship. But that is what we are tempted to do. We are tempted to forget that being a Christian is who we are in every aspect of our lives at home, with friends, when we we're out and about or in the work place. We are

tempted to forget our call is to help the poor and fight injustices. We are constantly tempted today to be less of a Christian.

However, the wonderful part of the gospel today reminds us that Jesus himself was tempted also. As I said, perhaps he was tempted to be less than who he was. When Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness he struggled with the meaning of his life. He saw then who he was and what he was meant to be. He could have chosen to just be among the people but he chose instead to follow a path that would lead to a life filled with controversy and even death. He chose to live a life that wasn't easy and had no simple answers. He chose to be in relationship with God and to let that relationship rule his life when everything around him told him not too.

This temptation story establishes the fact that for Jesus, as for us, the knowing and doing of God's will precipitates violent struggles of the soul. It is not easy. We are tempted to live by ourselves without God. We are tempted to deny our Christian faith. We are tempted to live by our own standards and not God's.

The ethics professor of Wesley Theological Seminary, Dr. Sondra Wheeler, said this about temptation: "that there are really only two fundamental kinds of moral challenge in life. There is perplexity, when we genuinely do not know what we ought to do. And there is temptation, when we clearly know what we ought to do. What we don't know is how to get ourselves to do it. The most insidious form of self-deception is persuading ourselves that we are perplexed when in reality we are facing temptation." You know some of the temptations come to us so subtly, so seductively, seemingly so innocuous that it's easy to believe they're anything but temptations such as fear, hopelessness, negativity, lack of self worth and lack of faith.

Jesus came out of the wilderness to preach repentance to the people. The meaning of repentance is to turn around. It means to look at things differently. We are to turn around and set our hearts on the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom is not a far away land that we hope to reach, nor is it life after death or an ideal state of affairs. God's kingdom is, first of all, the active presence of God's spirit within us. That spirit is a spirit of Love. Jesus saw that the hope of the world was for humanity as a whole to see things differently and to act in a spirit of Love.

So Lent gives us the time to look at those things that turn us inside out. Let's face it we struggle with our day-to-day complexities of life. Some of us wake up each day wondering when the other shoe is going to drop. These anxieties are real and so is the temptation to put our heads in the sand. So how are we in this time of Lent to wrestle with the wild beasts in our wilderness? How are we to prepare ourselves with self-reflection and repentance?

First of all, deal with the temptation that is the easiest to fall prey too which is not believing you are everything you can be. We all too often sell ourselves short. If you are standing there thinking you are worthless, or you are filled with fear, anger or loss, allow God to come to you in that place. Delve into this wilderness time for your soul. Let the spirit of God embrace you.

The gospel lessons tells us that the angels administered to Jesus. We too need to turn to our angels who are most often those who love us reminding us to keep on going, and telling us to turn to them and lean on them when things seem impossible. They tell us they'll be with us all along the way and help us conquer those wild beasts.

So you see, Lent gives us the gift of 40 days of spring cleaning for the soul. Forty days to cleanse the system and air out our eyes and ears and hearts to see what has gotten dry or dusty. Forty days to hang our hearts and minds out there in the spiritual air of the light of God.

As we begin our journey into Lent, may we proclaim the Good News of God so that we too can share God's hope and God's healing in this world. Let us pray that we will find the strength to live out our Christian call so that we too can *work* to bring about peace and justice into this broken world. Amen.