

First Sunday in Lent
All Saints'

March 10, 2019
Year C

Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Psalm 91:1-2,9-16

Romans 10:8b-13
Luke 4:1-13

O Dear Lord, we pray, create in us clean hearts. Amen

No matter the year, we always start the first Sunday in Lent with the reading of the temptation of Jesus in the desert. Always.

Just before Jesus is led out to the desert (by angels, no less) to spend 40 days fasting and in temptation, he was baptized by John the Baptist in the River Jordan. As John poured water over his head, the skies opened up with God saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

And always, for the last Sunday of Epiphany, (just last Sunday) we read about Jesus on the Mount with Elijah and Moses transfigured into dazzling light, with the skies opening up and God saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him!"

It looks as if Jesus is being fortified to fight the devil before his temptation in the desert and before his crucifixion: Jesus, you are loved, you are chosen, folks will listen to you, and you please God. Gifts of Praise for Jesus to make him strong. Don't worry Jesus, you can stand up to the devil, even when you're starving, even when you are dying!

Does that mean we are being fortified as well? Are we being strengthened by these Jesus' readings to fight Satan's temptation to have a lukewarm Lent or a lukewarm life because we may too busy and occupied with other things, or we think we are too inadequate or maybe because we are caught up in some kind of paralyzing guilt or greed? How do we find our freedom during our discipline of Lent?

When I taught an introductory course on Western Philosophy, we always had a unit on "Freedom." Does freedom exist? How do you know you are free? Can you prove it? Is life less meaningful if everything is determined? Great questions!

I always started the unit by giving the students this morning's gospel passage about the devil tempting Jesus in the desert. I would hand out copies of it in print, we would read it out loud, and then I would ask, "Is Jesus battling and defeating the Devil as his own personal struggle/temptation, on his own behalf, OR is Jesus battling and defeating the devil on our behalf, on behalf of humanity?"

When the students complained, as they always did, that they didn't know anything about Christianity, Jesus, or the Devil, I would say, it doesn't matter. There is no right answer. Both sides can be defended. Pick one. They would write for ten minutes, and almost always, the class would be split in half, and then we would be off debating who was right. The discussions were amazing, often focused on whether or not Jesus was truly tempted.

I tell you this story, because there was one class discussion I will never forget.

We were near the end of class, and a student, who identified as a Christian and had defended Jesus fighting the devil as a personal battle, because she needed him to struggle with temptation and to win as *an example* for her *to follow*. She sighed and said, “You know actually Jesus failed every one of these tests.”

“What do you mean?”

In the end, he turned stones to bread. He fed the hungry with nothing. He took a few loaves of bread and fish and fed over 5,000 people. That’s turning stones to bread. And didn’t he say he would free prisoners, give sight to the blind and set the oppressed free? Isn’t that turning “stones” into bread for the living?

And then another student jumped in and said, “He gained the authority of the world. Doesn’t everyone who meets him ask, “Where did this man get his authority?” He is the man of justice, the great teacher, who stumps everyone with his parables, the one who knows what people are thinking, who has authority over all the evil spirits, and even when mobs want to throw him over a cliff, he slips away miraculously.”

And then another student said, “Yeah, but he didn’t throw himself down from a pinnacle of the temple, demanding that God save him.”

“Yeah,” said my Christian student, “but he did throw himself on the cross, and maybe that was just as much a test of God as it was for Jesus. Did God have a choice not to raise him up?” I mean, if Jesus isn’t saved, then the whole experiment is no good. God knows that.”

And then the bell rang.

This conversation changed my view of the temptations forever. Let’s just say that the students were right. Jesus failed because, in the end, he did perform these miracles.

Yet, there’s a difference. Identifying this difference has really helped me with my faith. He did not act as a way to *prove* who he was, but rather he *trusted* in his own heart, his own intentions, his own faith, not as a way to exact his righteousness, but rather as a way to love God and to love us. We are invited to do the same.

Jesus offers us the same gift, because I don’t think his battle with Satan is personal. I think he is defeating Satan on our behalf. And in that defeat, we have been freed. As Christians, we’re not asked so much to follow Jesus as an example because no matter how good we are, we will always fail. Our invitation is to trust that we are free because the Spirit of the Living Lord resides within all of us. Jesus made sure of that.

When I was young, I remember my first-grade teacher, who was a nun telling us about Lent, which was a time to “examine our conscience.” “Just as you go to bed, remember your day and

all the nasty/naughty things you did and ask God to forgive you. Make promises to God you'll do better the next day."

As a dutiful student, I did this. My first memory of Lent. I also would pray, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord, my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord, my soul to take."

Not a very healthy combination, as well intended as it was. I never questioned God's weird preference for wanting to know about my weak moments before I fell asleep, before I might die. I never thought about what these actions were doing to shape my image of God and even my own image of myself.

If Advent is about "waking up" to the glory of God's love, Lent is about witnessing that glory, in all the different ways we choose to enter into a "Lenten practice." We are invited to see ourselves and the world as if we are seeing through the eyes of God. Now that's a challenging Lenten practice. Yet, in it, we move from a stance of self-scrutiny to a blessed time of discernment in order to see more clearly the grace of God's light.

We are about to start reading William P. Young's novel, *The Shack* in our Adult Ed class. It's a powerful story about who God is and who we are in the middle of evil things. Just as I was finishing the novel, Young emphasized two words whose slant should be shifted. And in that shift, these words would become less "scrutinizing" and more "discerning." Rather than see Lent as a way to be "responsible," why not think of ways you will be **responding** in Lent. And rather than focus on "expectation" of self and God, why not think of ways you will be living in the **expectancy** of all that God is doing for you and all of your opportunities to live in the Light of God's grace.

Welcome to Lent's Heart.