

The First Sunday of Lent
February 14, 2016
Year C, RCL

E. Bevan Stanley

Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Romans 10:8b-13
Luke 4:1-13

“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.” In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lent is the time to get ready for Holy Week and Easter. Lent is when we reflect on who we are and who our God is and how we relate to each other. We begin and end with the sign of the cross on our foreheads. On Ash Wednesday we begin this period by receiving the cross of ashes to remind us that we are dust and to dust we shall return. We are material bodies. We are flesh and blood. We are creatures made by God by God’s good pleasure for God’s joy. At the Great Vigil of Easter new Christians receive the seal of the Holy Spirit as they receive the cross of oil on their foreheads. Now they, as we, are children of God, filled with divine life, heirs of the Kingdom, members of the Body of Christ, sacraments of the presence of God in his creation.

God made us to be his lovers. The devil tries to break this relationship of love. So he tries to separate Jesus from his heavenly father. He has three temptations, and only three. The text says at the end that when he finished all the temptations he left. All other temptations are variations on these three. And it is precisely as we resist or overcome these temptations that we build our loving relationship with God.

1) The test of bodily desire, hunger. Turn one of these stones into bread. Here is a quick way to satisfy my hunger; why not take it? Making food to feed the hungry miraculously is not in itself wicked. Jesus in fact does so later on. The issue here is that, at this moment Jesus is fasting precisely to remember where his ultimate sustenance comes from. He does not need to break the fast because he is nourished in other ways. Even though Matthew’s account differs from Luke’s in the order of the other two temptations, the writers agree that this one comes first. One cannot

even encounter the other temptations until one has gotten past the simple one of physical hunger. Until one has put one's body into the hands of God.

Another aspect of this temptation is that it is about time as much as it is about food. The temptation only works if it is based on a false assumption. You feel hungry; here is a way to satisfy that hunger right now. However, if I know that a five minute walk would bring me to Aaron Levinson's kosher hotdog stand, that temptation is only as powerful as the pain of walking five minutes. The false assumption is that this is the only chance I will ever have to eat. This opportunity now is the only opportunity there will ever be. Just because God hasn't shown up today is no reason to accept the devil's food. However, we can never know what tomorrow will bring. Therefore we are left with the wisdom of Jesus' remark that we should take no thought of the morrow regarding food or clothing as well as the wisdom of the recovering alcoholic who is always tempted and who has learned to live his sobriety one day at a time. To say no to a temptation is not to say, "Never"; it is to say, "Not today, not this hour, not right now." Whatever I need will be provided and it will be provided in time, even though I cannot know when.

2) The second temptation is the temptation of cheap power. The devil says, "Bow down and worship me and I will give you authority of are all the kingdoms of the world. You claim that you have come to establish God's kingdom over the whole world. Here, just do it." This ἐξουσία, (exousia) authority, coercive power over others is attractive because it costs so little. It is much harder to achieve the same goals, even good goals, by building relationships, developing gifts, reaching consensus, teaching, and organizing. The applause and glory that will come with the fixing of everyone's problems is nice too. The fact that to fix someone else's problem only makes them weak and dependent and is therefore an assault on their self-esteem is all too easily forgotten. And in fact Jesus does not dispute the devil's claim that he has this kind of power to give. The problem is that it is the wrong kind of power.

This is the temptation of unilateral power, of individualism, of working as *prima dona* and not as a team player. Do I want a short term fix, or do I want to help build the Kingdom? It is no accident that this temptation is connected to worshipping the devil. To accept this form of

power is to turn one's back on God, who uses the other kind of power, the power of love and relationship. To accept the coercive power is to worship the devil, who according to the myth wanted exactly the kind of glory and power he is offering to Jesus. And having that kind of power is precisely what separates Satan from God and creates his hell and damnation, his fundamental isolation from every other creature.

3) Finally, the temptation to jump off the temple and have God rescue you, is ultimately the temptation of faith. If you have decided to trust the future in preference to fearing it and insisting on instant gratification, and if you have decided to trust the effectiveness of consensual power among rather than coercive power over, then you are trusting God. Can you realistically do that? Is God really your Father? Is he really dependable?

Again there are two dimensions of this temptation. The first has to do with my own interior doubt. If I don't jump am I really admitting I don't trust God?

The second is that the devil is laughing at me and sneering, and I would love to wipe that sneer off his handsome face. But why should I care what the enemy thinks? Why should I care what the crowds think?

For me even to ask if God is dependable is to forget that God is God and I am not. God is not answerable to me, except by sheer gift. God chooses to love me as God's own child; that is not a right I have. If he chooses to be answerable to me, that is itself a form of grace; I have no such claim on him. That is why Jesus responds with the text, "Thou shalt not test the Lord your God." God loves me and will protect me because it is God's good pleasure to do so. And if God doesn't, I am doomed anyway. There is no point to such a test a) because God is God, and b) because it would not prove anything anyway.

Both the answers to these temptations and the power to resist them come from Jesus' clarity about who he is and whose he is. He is God, and he has taken on our human flesh. Our answers to these same temptations also come from our clarity about who we are and whose we are. We are dust into which God has breathed the Holy Spirit.

And so today as we enter into this season of Lent, as we face into these question of who we are and who our God is, as we enter into our own wilderness, we will be led by the Holy Spirit. We will learn again who we are and whose we are. Each of us is invited to his or her body and all its needs and desires into God's hands. We will recommit ourselves to forming relationships of love and cooperation, rather than grasping for cheap unilateral power over others. And we will remember that we are made of the dust of the earth and the breath of God, and that we are God's precious possession whom God cherishes with all his heart and power.

So as we enter into the wilderness of testing, we remember that it is the Holy Spirit who leads us there. It is the Holy Spirit who will guide us during our time in the desert just as she did the Children of Israel after escaping from slavery in Egypt. And when we return from our testing, when we enter the land promised to us and the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus, we will know who we are and whose we are.