

Sermon, 10 February 2008—First Sunday in Lent

Genesis 2:15-7; 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-9; Matthew 4:1-11

This is the First Sunday in Lent. As is true every year, our Gospel reading today is the story of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness after his baptism. We are told nothing about the purification he underwent in that blast furnace. We only hear that, at the end of those forty days, he had a conversation with the Tempter. What happens when we bring that figure into focus, this other we can't see clearly but know is the one who stands opposed—opposed to humanity and opposed to God? What happens if this mirage of evil, hovering and shimmering over the desert, smoothes itself over into a glistening mirror, and we can see, not what opposes us, but how we ourselves oppose the good?

I am speaking of human beings whose first instinct is the easier softer way, whose cunning is all directed towards self-preservation and self-gratification and even self-glorification, whose public face claims to know a shortcut, but whose private face intends to turn the car around. I find myself identifying with the one who tempts, that is, who questions whether this is necessary and whether that is timely and whether the other thing is expedient or whether that is morally right—all in order to poke holes in the resolve of others, to delay what will require me to change. I am the one who, when shown transfiguration, reaches for sunglasses. Perhaps, though, all of us are ready to commit to the good by half-measures, signed up for a better world as long as it costs us nothing, which avails us nothing. We must spend time in the sand and rocks and emptiness and harsh light to see that we are ready tempters

It makes no difference to claim that we are only aware of occasionally tempting other people and that we would not presume to tempt God. The

issue is how we approach the relationship, whether with other human beings or with God, constantly trying to deflect God or others towards our own ends. Frankly, I have too often found that a pose of religious modesty and reverence is a mask over agnosticism, over functional atheism. I do not tempt God because I choose to do without God. There aren't any markets I know of where I can pawn that off as virtue.

The first temptation is to maneuver in relationship, whether with others or with God, to guarantee that material needs are met. Why shouldn't we put physical needs first? We need to survive. You can't take it with you. You only go around once. So why not turn the stones to bread? When you get down to it, you gotta live and you gotta obey your thirst.

When you get down to the core of this temptation of God or others, it is the wheedling whining urge: "take care of me, provide for me, look after me." Well, shouldn't we approach God for our basic needs? Of course we should; no religion has ever denied that. And isn't it important to learn when to ask for help? Of course it is; no mature person has ever denied that. The problem comes in when that is the only reason we approach God or approach other people. We know this so well already that all of us like to think of ourselves as immune from succumbing to carry this temptation. But perhaps we have only learned to defend ourselves against being accused of it. Virtue and self-sufficiency are the best camouflage in the world.

The second temptation is to manipulate relationships to satisfy emotional needs. Why not? Don't we need fulfillment and self-expression? Strut your stuff. Show us what you've got. Give us a thrill. So why not launch yourself out over Jerusalem and sail down from the pinnacle of the Temple? Or maybe all you need is love. When push comes to shove, I gotta be me until the day I die, but most of all, I'll do it my way.

At the heart of this temptation is the itch for sensation: “make me happy, attend to me, I don’t care if you applaud me or nurse me, just help me look and feel good.” It is no mistake that the devil takes Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem for this temptation, because over and over the devil takes us to church for exactly these reasons. Were the tunes on the old calliope perky? Did the choir director keep enough balls in the air long enough? How did the lector time that swing from the rung of one trapeze to the next? Did the preacher really manage to land on his feet after that double back-flip? Who chose the selections for the concession stand out in the lobby? And above all, on the way home, did I think, “well, that was good”?

The third temptation, as Matthew lines them up, is to approach God and others with a proposal about who gets to be at the center of everything. This is the root of every other temptation. What is offered hides a lie: “I will give you everything”—but everything is not mine to give. What is presented as the condition of the gift is what is actually at stake: “if you will worship me.” At this bargaining table, that is the only thing that either side actually possesses. One claims to possess the glory of the world, but does not; the other does possess in trust the life given by God, its abilities and integrity and promise. The fact of our spiritual nature is that we are not and cannot become self-possessed. Our self must be offered into what is greater than itself if we are to be happy. The cunning of this temptation is to pretend to make a gift, while actually stimulating the other’s desire to give the self: “I will give you everything, if you worship me.”

The danger of this temptation is not to the one being tempted; they will be deceived and grieve, but their mistake was to love. The danger of this temptation is entirely to the tempter, who not only cannot give what is offered, but also cannot receive what is being requested: I do not have this

everything that I am offering to give you, and I cannot receive your worship, as much as I might crave it, and ask for it, and try to trick you into it.

The root of this temptation, hardest of all to pull out of the depths of our psyche, is my desire to make it all about me, to make me the center, to make me the goal of every choice and the standard of every decision. So my lust is to be, not only the center of my life, but the center of yours as well. My avarice is not to spend myself on anything but myself. My fear is that, if I am not the black hole of my universe, sucking everything down into myself, then I have nothing to hold me together at all.

Now remember Jesus has a response to each of these temptations. He resists them, not with his own resources, but with those of Scripture. He quotes the Torah as soon as he recognizes each temptation as it surfaces before him.

To our anxiety in the area of physical survival and material needs, Jesus points out that we already know that what gives us life is not food. “Human beings do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” The evidence we already have is that what gives our life contentment and peace is not material security, but our dependence on wisdom greater than our self, our ability to see beyond and not be driven by our physical needs. We are at our best when we see that there are values greater than survival.

To our gluttony in the area of emotional demands, Jesus points out that we already know that manipulating the reactions of others, blackmailing and coercing them into looking after us, claiming entitlements that trump communal good, never works. “You shall not tempt God.” The evidence we already have is that love only satisfies us when it is a free gift. We are at our best when we see that there are values greater than security.

To our relentless self-obsession, as we offer false promises to others in order to bring them into orbit around our own dark star, he points out that we are not made to become our own hope and our own love, nor can we be the end of hope and love for others. “Worship God; serve only God.” It is our own lack of contentment with our self, our own despair at being our empty center, that causes us to try to seduce others into paying homage to what we know is not there, perverting the spiritual truth that our life is a gift by demanding the gift of life from another creature. The evidence we already have is that we find peace when we know that God has given us all things; and we are at our best when we pass that gift on as sojourners and pilgrims, who in this wilderness have no continuing city.

Notice that Jesus never denies the potency of each temptation. We could wrongly think that one way to avoid tempting God and others is to avoid them, to deny our need of them, to refuse to recognize them. But isolation is not wisdom. On its own, the fear of error does not lead us to the discovery of truth, as William James wryly remarks. Jesus won’t allow avoidance. Instead, when asked, he says that there are two commandments supreme above all others: “Love the LORD, your God, with all your heart and soul and strength and mind;” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

We do need each other, but we need each other, not to feed on, but to serve. What takes us outside our self connects us to what surrounds our self. It steadies us. It supports us.

I am not saying that there is not a terror we can hardly bear to recognize at not having things center on our self. That terror is the sign of our fallenness. That we are somehow not right with the cosmos is the engine that drives all our efforts at getting things to center on us, to reassure us, to feed us, living forever in the despair of infancy.

What we are offered as the opportunity to heal this is to turn that reaching out of our hands from desperate clutching into self-offering. Nothing is truer in Scripture than John's formula that we love because God first loved us. If we are not shown how, if the gift of love isn't poured into us by the experience of being loved, then we do not know how to turn our urge to tempt around and let it go.

Make no mistake: the cliff-face of faith has its own sense of vertigo. Can we live by faith? Do we in fact believe that God's intention for us is good, so that we can risk this gift of the self in the desert, and not settle instead for the life of the tempter?