

First Sunday in Lent-2018

II Cor. 6

Matthew 4:1ff

+In Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Paul Scherer the renowned preacher and pastor of Holy Trinity Church in New York, and professor of homiletics at Union Seminary was once queried about the strange images sometimes contained in Scripture. “I find it hard to make sense of and frankly, often do not pay much attention to some of it...What do you think, Professor?” Scherer’s response was honest, direct, and brief: “The Scriptures do not care in the least what you or I think of the images contained there. They simply announce a world at whose center is the Holy One of Israel, and the Kingdom of his Son. All other concerns are secondary”.

So it is today as we are drawn up into the wilderness to both watch and participate with Jesus and a shadowy figure with many guises. But first, and foremost the message and intent is quite clear. This is not so much about whether Satan can lure Jesus to fall for this or that sin; it is rather a portrait of Jesus as God’s Son, tempted as we are. Where Israel, as God’s Son, (called thus in Deuteronomy) failed in its wilderness wandering, Jesus, as God’s Son, succeeds in all the challenges. And as we are drawn into the story, we find our own struggles revealed, and a clear sense of why we need a Messiah.

There are so many flashback and foreshadowing moments in this text that it is actually overwhelming. There are 40 days related to 40 years in the wilderness; Israel is fed Manna while Jesus hungers; Jesus is driven by the Spirit, or will he be driven by self-interest; Satan asks him to pay homage just as the Magi did to Jesus at his birth; Jesus is taken to the pinnacle of the temple, but the word actually means a ‘wing’ recalling Psalm 91 (with his pinions he will cover you, and you will find shelter under His wings); Satan then taunts Jesus with the words “If you are the Son of God come down, ” which is exactly what is hurled at him during his crucifixion; and perhaps all of this is part of-- Matthew’s method. By overloading our senses we come face to face with our own limitations, and likewise our need for relief and assistance. Getting a new mind, repentance, is far more than feeling sorrowful for our mistakes—it is to be willing to receive redemption. Lent is, after all, about just this in terms of our human condition, and then even more about what a striking gift Jesus really is! Matthew is again telling us who Jesus is for us, and the intensity of the story assists us in realizing our need for him.

So, what are we to make of these remarkable snapshots? Satan is a striking character here. He is described as the great slanderer. What happens when we are victims of slander? Our reputation or who we really are is blurred and skewed by partial accuracy. There is a wonderful scene in the movie, “Oh Brother, Where Art Thou.” Ulysses Everett McGill, played by George Clooney is a bigger than life character, at least in his own eyes, and the leader of a group of 3 escapees from a chain gang. They pick up a straggler; a black guitar player, who is Tommy Boy Johnson—famous for his blues playing and the myth that he sold his soul to the devil to learn how to play so well. The dialogue is captivating.

Everett asks, “What did the devil give you for your soul, Tommy?”

Tommy: “He taught me to play this here guitar real good.”

Delmar: “O Tommy, for that you sold your immortal soul”!

Tommy: "Well, I wasn't using it"!

Then someone asks what the devil looks like, and,

Everett proclaims: "The great Satan himself is red, with horns, a pitchfork, and a long bifurcated tail".

Tommy replies: "Oh no, No sir...he's white, as white as you folks with big empty eyes".

Empty...that is the catch word. When we are emptied of the image of God within us, and pursue other things to fill souls that, yearning for substance; that is what slander is about from a religious perspective. It is the loss of our vision of our truest nature and home, and somehow we cannot quite fill it without the aid of one who understands and has walked this way.

Then we enter the wilderness. It is not so much a place as a state of being and mind. It is, as Blaise Pascal' would say, being emptied of diversions. I have a friend for whom each time a conversation enters painful or self-revealing territory, will change the subject, begin to engage in other activities, or segue somewhere else. Psychologists call it resistance. In the journey of faith we enter wilderness moments to see and face how it is that we are empty, where we try to fill that with things that will not last, and finally to submit our lives and souls to God who alone waits for us in love. And sometimes the way is through what tempts us.

The first of the temptations is to turn stones into bread. What really is at stake is our desire for God to ensure our own **comfort**; or the temptation to serve ourselves before any other. If I may be permitted a personal note I found myself asking my spiritual director a question. "Why is it that the closer I feel in my relationship with God, the more discouraged I become about the world around me?" It seemed to me that I should have been having the opposite reaction--That, somehow, my deepening relationship with God would give me a filter through which the pain and hurt, the chaos and violence of the world would pale in comparison to the hope and joy that I knew was all around me. But that's not what happened. I found myself profoundly affected by others' pain. I wondered if ignoring the hard stories would alleviate the tension.

But then I noticed something. The more I created distance between myself and the pain of the world around me, the more there seemed to be distance between myself and God. I suspect, we can't have it both ways. That's just what happens. It is the risk of being in relationship with God. When we allow our hearts to be open to God, we give up control of what, or who, finds their way in. In short, we cannot merely seek after our own well-being—the bread is not just for us.

The second temptation we encounter is attempting to use God for power. The real issue for Jesus was that to do what he was asked would have meant everyone around him would have been impressed and followed along with joy and glee. It is the temptation to use God as a **power broker** in order to appear spectacular and be above the fray of human existence. Had our Lord succumbed to this he surely would not have met the challenge of the cross. And in the same moment the real power of God to encounter and be present to human suffering and weakness would likewise have been lost. Winning in the short term would have deprived the world of one of its deepest needs; the God who is willing to be with the darkest places in life.

The final temptation is particularly reflective of our age. It is the urge simply to find **glory** in terms of human wealth, influence, domination, and violence. It is to win by dazzling all others. It is seen in the fruitless belief that we can rise above the fray of the world to a rarefied existence.

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But in truth hearts and minds are not captivated or altered by glory. You can have it all if you are willing to yield to me, says the evil one. That is the false promise and false hope of such a way. What makes it so powerful is the feeling that we can place ourselves above the world, yet God chooses the exact opposite. He chooses to stand in the mess and love us anyway; not by force, but by caring more deeply and freely for us even in our hurts, frustration, or anger. God does not use coercion, but compassion to win the world.

As we walk these great forty days from temptation to the cross, I ask you to walk gently and with your hearts open. Listen for Jesus. He will call out to you as he makes his way from temptation to crucifixion. Jesus will call out to you at each step. And in the midst of death, domination, and violence, you will hear his voice: "Choose life," Choose my way and the life it promises. It may look to all the world like losing...but sometimes losing is winning. Amen+