March 9, 2014 – 1 Lent

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Today we have our usual story for the beginning of Lent – the temptation of Jesus in the desert. The forty days the Gospel says that Jesus spent in the desert is the model for our forty days of Lent, although in the Bible the number forty is a code number simply meaning “a really, really long time.”

While Jesus is in the desert, the devil tempts him three ways. It’s like a mini, Biblical, Mazlow’s hierarchy of needs. For those of you not familiar with this theory, it was proposed by the American psychologist, Abraham Mazlow, to explain human motivation. According to Mazlow, there are five levels of needs, and his idea was that we can’t move up a level until the needs of the level below are met.

Here’s his list, starting from the most basic:

Physiological needs – such things as breathing, food, and water

Safety needs – such as personal safety, employment security, health, and property

Love and belonging – such as family, friendship, intimacy

Esteem – such as self esteem, confidence, respect, achievement

Self-actualization – such as morality, creativity, spontaneity, problem solving, and acceptance of facts. This, according to Mazlow, is the highest level of achievement and can only be gotten to through the other levels.

So starting at the bottom, Satan appeals to Jesus’ stomach and the great understatement that after fasting for forty days he was famished. “IF you’re the Son of God,” says the devil – no doubt he had been listening in at Jesus’ baptism and heard God himself say that – “If you’re the Son of God, one word from you will turn these rocks into Wonder Bread.” But Jesus answers this opening salvo by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3 – “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

But the devil is persistent and moves up to the next level on the hierarchy - safety. He takes Jesus to the holy city – which Matthew’s Jewish audience would recognize as Jerusalem – and up to the very tip top of the Temple. “Fine,” he says. “Two can play at that game – I can quote the Bible, too. Try Psalm 91:12 on for size – ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’ I double-dog dare you to jump down.”

But Jesus doesn’t take the bait. He sees the devil’s Psalm and raises him Deuteronomy 6:16 – “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” In other words, “Talk to the hand, tempter, because the ears aren’t listening.” Jesus – 2, devil 0.

So the devil goes all in and combines all three top levels at once. He takes Jesus to the top of the world and shows him all of the glory of the earthly kingdoms. “All of this can be yours,” he tells Jesus, in what I think of as the oily Grinch voice, “with only one teeny-tiny little catch.”

And here we see a different and much stronger reaction from Jesus. “Away with you, Satan!” he yells, and Satan is gone. So what was it about this third temptation that got such a rise out of Jesus? Because it’s important to our understanding of both the divine and the human nature of Jesus to believe that he really WAS tempted, as our Lenten Proper Preface tells us, in every way as we were. If we don’t accept that he could be tempted, just as we can, we’re not accepting him as completely human.

I have two ideas, and they both have a direct impact on us and how we live our lives. The first is that Jesus was tempted by the short cut, the easy road. Jesus knows he’s the Son of God, and is destined to be the Lord of all creation. But first, having chosen to become one of us, he also knows he has to die. But here, Satan is offering the fast track. Go right for the kingship without the sacrifice. It’s the same thing – well NEARLY the same – and a lot fewer people will get hurt.

Who among us wouldn’t at least be tempted to avoid an unpleasant task or difficult choice if someone offered an easier solution? We’re only human, too. I think about the Olympic skaters, Meryl Davis and Charlie White. They’ve been skating together for 17 years. I imagine there were times when they would have much preferred to just cut to the chase and win the medals, without 17 years of bruised egos and bruised behinds.

And then there’s the idea of saving his followers from the inevitable consequences of following him – wandering penniless through the country and being in constant danger from both Jewish and Roman authorities. Jesus is able to easily toss off the temptations that involve his own personal comfort or safety, but to spare others pain? That’s much, much harder.

My second idea is that Jesus might have been tempted by the “think of all the GOOD you could do with all that power” temptation. Not personal power for personal gain, but power for the good of all.

I just read about something that illustrates this perfectly. There’s a fundamentalist pastor by the name of Mark Driscoll, who’s the co-founder of the Seattle mega-church, Mars Hill. Mr. Driscoll wrote a book called *Real Marriage*, which outlines his ideas on Biblical marriage. As the book was set to come out, Mars Hill Church paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to a marketing company to pre-order a bunch of copies in order to make sure the book got on the New York Times’ best seller list.

The funny thing about this case is that the New York Times has already taken some steps to prevent bulk buying in order for a book to make the list because of yet another evangelical pastor’s book being bulk purchased by HIS church. So the marketing company had to pre-order copies of *Real Marriage* using different names and different credit card numbers, all of which were provided by Mars Hill. It’s all perfectly legal, but it IS kind of shady.

Now, I happen to think that this guy’s way off base in his theology, but regardless of what I think, HE thinks he’s doing God’s work, I’m sure. Giving him the benefit of the doubt here, I could see him thinking that it would be better for his work and for his flock if his book were a success. And the best way for a book to be a success is to be a best seller. So the ends justify the means, right?

But they don’t. If you amass billions of dollars on the backs of underpaid workers, it doesn’t matter how much you give away to charity, it’s still wrong. If you hold power over someone, even if you use that power in what YOU think is their best interest, it’s still wrong. If you get elected to a political office by lying and slandering, even if everything you do from then on is noble and pure, it’s still wrong.

The reason it’s wrong is because God is left almost completely out of the picture. When Jesus says, “Worship the Lord and serve only him,” he’s saying more than merely “Don’t worship the devil,” which really is kind of a given for us. More than that, he’s saying that everything we do, all of our efforts, all of our works, should have God at the center. Everything else, no matter how noble or good it starts out, can be corrupted and we can fall prey to the temptation of Satan.

So as we move forward in Lent, think about what temptations you might face. The Church is constantly teaching about fasting and self-denial, so especially during Lent, I’m not too worried about people being tempted by attacks on those.

But whenever we have a chance to take a short cut, or whenever we might be faced with an unethical choice, even if it’s for a good cause, just take a moment to think and pray. Is this God-centered? Will taking this path pull me or anyone else away from God? Even Jesus had to work hard to avoid these temptations, and he did it by worshiping and serving God alone.

Amen.