February 17, 2013

© Jean E. Mornard

The proper preface for Lent says, in part, "Through Jesus Christ our Lord; who was tempted in every way as we are, yet did not sin." This begs the question of what those temptations are. What are we tempted by?

In today's Gospel, Jesus is faced with three temptations by Satan. Though the circumstances are very different from what we experience in our lives, if we are looking at Jesus as having been tempted in the same way as we are, we can see our own temptations in those he experienced in the desert.

The first temptation follows what has to be the biggest understatement in the entire Bible. "He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished." No fooling!

Though I should note that in the Bible forty days doesn't necessarily mean a month and a third. Forty is a number that is used as a kind of numerical code to denote a very long time, in the same way that 144,000 means a great many. For example, the Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years, and the Great Flood lasted for forty days.

In the case of the last example, obviously, if we go by what the people are saying who were on that recent stranded and drifting Carnival cruise ship, it's virtually impossible to go for FIVE days at sea without proper plumbing, much less FORTY days, especially forty days with a ship full of animals!

So we don't need to figure out if Jesus would actually survive for forty days without food. We just know that he was out there for a long time – long enough for him to be really suffering from hunger, and to be very weak and vulnerable.

So at the time when Jesus was weakest, the first of Satan's three temptations appealed to his bodily needs. I find it interesting that Satan didn't tempt him by holding out a loaf of ACTUAL bread. This might be an indicator that Satan couldn't actually create the bread himself, but I think it more likely that it was to get Jesus to use his divine power to help only himself. As we will see in a couple of chapters, at the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus is perfectly willing and capable of producing bread when needed – just not for himself alone.

Those of you who were here on Wednesday will remember that I talked about the three Lenten spiritual disciplines of fasting, charitable giving, and prayer as being about our dependence on God for everything we need.

The verse Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 8 in response to this first temptation tells us that physical food should be secondary to the word of God for our sustenance. A good exercise during Lent might be to figure out what we are depending on, if it isn't God, and to see how we are responding to the temptation of a loaf of bread or its equivalent in our lives.

~~~~~~~~~~

So thwarted at his first attempt, Satan ups the ante. This temptation seems broad, but is really pretty subtle. "You could bypass all of this wandering around and speaking to people individually, Jesus. Here's the whole world tied up in a neat bow ready for your rule. With just one teeny tiny little stipulation…"

More than just the temptation to great power, this is the temptation of the easy path, the fast track, the short cut. We hear stories on a daily basis about people taking short cuts to the top – sports figures taking performance enhancing drugs, politicians taking money from special interest group in return for political favors, ministers peddling cheap grace in order to enhance their numbers. And we hear their excuses – "I have to do it to be competitive," or "everyone's doing it, why shouldn't I," or "it's not hurting anyone."

Michael's grandfather used to say, "If it seems like it's too good to be true, it probably is." There's always a price to pay. The athletes who dope ruin the integrity of the game, not to mention put themselves at significant health and financial risk. The politicians who give in to special interests lose concern for the people who voted for them, their constituents. And those ministers who sell a feel good, watered down Gospel deprive their flocks of the true meaning of God's redemption.

Once again, Jesus counters with Deuteronomy – chapter 6, this time – and his message to Satan is simple. I will serve only God. Period. So here's another Lenten exercise to try. Examine your life to see who or what you are serving that isn't God. The examples I gave were pretty disreputable, if not downright illegal, but there are more benign examples, too, of where we are putting our allegiance somewhere else than at the foot of the throne of God.

~~~~~~~~~~

Satan's last temptation of Jesus is the most subtle of all. It certainly is a foreshadowing of the people mocking Jesus at his crucifixion, which is anything but subtle, but there is another way of looking at it, too.

Satan could be saying to Jesus, "I don't believe this God of yours is all that powerful. Get him to rescue you, IF HE CAN." How many times have we heard people say, "Why did YOUR God let this happen? He can't be all THAT powerful." We've heard it about the Holocaust. We heard it after Katrina. We heard it after Sandy. We heard it after Newtown. It's a more cynical version of "why do bad things happen to good people?"

And this is why this temptation is so subtle, and so damaging. We DON'T have the answers to those questions, and sometimes our protestations of faith seem a little thin. Nevertheless, we have to persist in them. The more we protest our faith, even in the face of terrible events, the more the Spirit will shore up that faith in us. We will begin to see the miracles that happen every day, and especially during bad times.

In the Book of Acts and the letters of Paul, amid all the trials that he undergoes, we hear stories of honest-to-God miracles, but we also hear stories of miraculous changes of heart in people whom Paul encounters. If we consistently profess our own faith, like Paul does, not stupidly or blindly, but firmly and truthfully, people will notice and will be moved by it. But even if they aren't, WE will be changed by it.

So here's your last Lenten exercise, for this sermon at least. Read through the book of Acts and some of Paul's epistles, and look for both the miracles and the changes of heart. Note Paul's behavior on those occasions. Then figure out how you might respond if someone challenges you about the power and love of God.

Lent is a time for self-examination. It should be a time to look into all of the corners of our life to see where our faith is being tested and facing those tests, using Jesus' temptation in the wilderness as our guide.

Being tempted isn't a sin. Our proper preface says Jesus was tempted in every way as we are, yet did not sin. The temptation came first, and his response to was not to fall into sin. We can do that, too, and by the same means Jesus used. If it was a foregone conclusion that Jesus wouldn't fall for Satan's wiles, why bother putting it in the Gospel. There had to be doubt, so that there could be choice. Jesus was fully human as well as fully divine. His example is one that we should follow, and one that we CAN follow.

So this Lent, follow Jesus into the wilderness. Practice saying no to temptations, both big and small. Practice turning to God for the strength to turn away from the pull of bodily desires, easy roads, and doubt. And God will be right there with you in that wilderness. Jesus wasn't left in the wilderness to fend for himself – the Holy Spirit was with him, and is with us in our trials and temptations, too.

Have a holy and blessed Lent!

Amen.