

1st Lent C 2022
Sermon Notes

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I will never forget the first time my son, Will, had a close encounter with this morning's passage from Luke. He was four years old and he had taken part in a lively discussion during children's chapel at St. Paul's in Mt. Lebanon, Pennsylvania about this story. The discussion had been led by a very dynamic teacher and story teller himself and he had obviously made a strong connection with the children that morning.

I knew this because that afternoon, Will and I were at the grocery store together. We were walking down one of the aisles when all of a sudden he asked, "Dad..... what do you know about the devil?" You need to know that Will did say a lot in those days, and so I immediately knew that this was extremely important.

My mind raced. Should I start by explaining to him Augustine's theology of evil? Should I trace two thousand years of comparing liberal and conservative perspectives on the subject? Should I just tackle the whole problem of "theodicy", that is the theology concerns itself directly with the problem of evil?

Then I caught myself and changed course. After all, Will was only four! Instead, I responded in the fashion any wise parent would. I asked him, "What do you think about the devil?"

"Well," said Will, "He talked to Jesus in the desert. He was trying to do mean things to him." Then, Will looked around the store and with his voice dropping to a whisper, asked in a very conspiratorial way, "Dad, what if we were in a store, and you and Mom were in one aisle and I was on another and....there was candy...He paused for effect...and the devil all of a sudden showed up and said to me, "You should take some."

I was amazed! I had a budding theologian on my hands! He would surely be a straight A student in any seminary of his choice! He would be the next Thomas Aquinas or Karl Barth!

I eagerly leaned down and asked him, "What would you do?"

He thought about this for a minute. And then he smiled. "I'd say....thank you very much!"

Out of the mouths of babes....

The nature of evil, the nature of Christ, the power of temptation: each of these themes have been identified in the opening verses of the fourth chapter of Luke's Gospel. And for good reason. The first two verses alone capture this: "Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by Spirit in the wilderness., where for forty days he was tempted by the devil."

Here, Jesus is closely identified as being in relationship with the Holy Spirit. Evil is personified as the devil.

And the 40 days of being tempted in the wilderness represents the temptations of the world that you and I face every day of our lives.

Now, when you stop and take a close look at each of these three temptations that Jesus faced in the wilderness, it doesn't seem as if they are really all that evil, does it?

To feed the hungry:

I mean, turning stones into bread? Think about the benefits. If Jesus had accepted the devil's offer, he not only would have satiated his own hunger out there in the desert. He could have also turn the super abundance of stones that cover Israel's landscape into ample food to feed the many hungry of his own people who were starving under Roman occupation. What would the harm have been in that? How would that have been sinful?

To rule the world with justice:

Who would have been a better ruler of all the kingdoms of the world than Jesus? If he were on the ballot, I would vote for him, wouldn't you? Instead of the autocratic despots who have sat on the thrones of nations and empires over the centuries who have been only been interested in their own power and wealth, Jesus would have been that rare ruler who would have served his people with love, grace, honesty and compassion. How would that be wrong? How would that have been sinful. How would that have been evil?

To take a swan dive off the pinnacle of the Temple only have his fall broken by the angels of heaven.

I mean, can you imagine the publicity Jesus would have received in that moment? Word would have spread like wildfire! The world loves spectacle! He would have drawn all the world to himself in one news cycle and had their undivided attention, allowing him to efficiently share the good news that he had sent by God to proclaim. Film at 11!

All right. Let's take a deep breath. Of course, the great evil contained in all these subtle temptations satan dangles before Jesus in the wilderness are revealed in each of Jesus' responses:

"It is written, one does not live by bread alone."

"Worship the Lord God, and serve only him."

"It is said, Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

You see, the message of this passage is that, while evil sometimes comes in attractive packaging, there is only one true path to righteousness, and that is in complete obedience to, and trust in, God.

In fact, the key to this story, the cornerstone of this passage, is found in verse 8. Here, Jesus is quoting from Deuteronomy 6:13. Despite our remarkable human ability to rationalize pretty much any temptation that comes our way, the sonship of God is revealed in his response to God's adversary, "Worship the Lord God, and serve only him."

Of course, there is a reason why those who put the lectionary of readings we hear on Sunday mornings chose to place this passage in the 1st Sunday of Lent. For at the heart of Lent, there is this one great theme: To be a Christian means to trust in God to the point that we become entirely obedient to God, no matter how tempting other choices offered to us in life may seem to be. We too are invited to live, not by bread alone, but by ingesting and being nourished by every word of the Gospel that Jesus came to proclaim.

We are called to trust entirely in God and not be swayed by the whims and vicissitudes of this world, compromising here and there in order to get a leg up on those around us.

Finally, we are to worship the Lord God, and serve only Him. Not just on Sunday mornings and any other time when it might be convenient or it might suit us. Always. Completely. Without wavering.

You know, it seems to me that “obedience” has become a dirty word in our society. We tend to look down and sneer at anything that we think smacks of obedience. After all, we love liberty and that means we are free to do what we want whenever we want. No one tells me what to do!

But is that really true? Of course not. In that wilderness, Jesus shows us exactly what liberty and freedom really are all about. They are about being obedient to the God who loved us first, indeed, who so loved the whole world that He gave his only Son in order to liberate us, to set us free from sin and evil, and ultimately, from death itself.

This is what we are called to ponder and pray about today. My friends, welcome to the season of Lent.

Amen.