

Sermon 021008 Temptation  
Scripture- Matthew 4: 1-11  
Sermon Title "What Devil?"

In this morning's Gospel, his cousin, John, has just baptized Jesus. So the Spirit has led Jesus out into the desert. Jesus fasts for 40 days and 40 nights. The 40 and 40 is where we get the length of Lent, although if you count the actual days, you'll find that Lent lasts 46 days. Jesus' fasting is where people picked up on the giving up of things like candy, sex, and gin. It is also where we get the notion of Lent being a time of reflection, contemplation, even to use Lent as a time to be penitential. I think of Jesus' time in the desert as his time to ready himself for the awesome work before him. Just after his Baptism, he contemplates his arduous mission and prepares himself for his ministry. In modern terms, it might be called his 'dark night of the soul.' This is the first Sunday in Lent. This is a not-to-subtle reminder of our own struggle in the spiritual wilderness between the reminder of our mortality on Ash Wednesday and the victory of Easter Sunday.

While in the wilderness, Jesus undergoes a series of tests. At its most obvious, this is a lesson about temptation. Jesus is very hungry, famished in some translations. Hunger, not the premature craving for the next meal that's on its way, but real hunger may be the most devastating force in world. It can change the personality, warp judgment, and turn a person into nothing more than a beast.

Hunger can turn one into desperate lengths. The devil, always the clever marketer, offered the hungry Jesus bread. The devil does this by trying to prod Jesus into an unnecessary display of Jesus' divine power. Jesus doesn't play games with his power. When he uses his divine power throughout the gospels, it is always for the right reasons like healing and creating discipleship. He declines the devil's challenge and rejects the offer.

The devil is clever at the temptation game, however. This story here starts to sound like an action movie. The devil again tries to get Jesus to prove to him who he is by bringing him to the highest point in the temple and trying to get him to jump off. The devil is trying to convince Jesus that God will suspend gravity if it's a member of the family. 'Try it and see.' Nobody likes to have his identity challenged or threatened. We are insecure enough without someone always demanding proof. But Jesus again rises above and responds with a challenge of his own, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

The trickster is still at it on the third try. The devil brings Jesus up to the high mountain and offers to give him the entire world and its splendor. Now the devil is tempting Jesus with worldly power, sovereignty, riches, and real estate. Now, if the devil had known my grandmother, he would have quoted her in his

sales pitch. She had been admonished by her doctor to curb her diet. She said, “Better to die from having it than wanting it.”

Now, if Jesus had accepted this offer, he would have saved both himself and me a lot of preaching and you a lot of listening. But Jesus is not so easily bought. By the way, the devil in the story is offering something that is not his to give. Yes, the devil is more at home here in this world than anywhere else besides hell but he doesn't own this world. Jesus cannot be bought.

The temptations of Jesus touch at three of the areas where we humans are most vulnerable- survival, identity, and power. So, Jesus the teacher gives us a lesson on temptation and resistance to it. One of the strengths of the story of the temptations in the desert is that Jesus confronts the devil. He doesn't run and hide. He even goes along to see the temptations in fullness before confronting and rebuking the devil. So too do we face the full impact of our temptations and so too must we confront them. When the devil recedes in the story, you have a sense that it is strategic retreat for some strategy sessions on how to approach the next battle. The question is where and when the devil will strike again. We all have a pretty good idea about that.

Actually, I've always struggled with this image of the devil as a person. I always think of him as the little red half human-half lizard guy on the cans of Deviled Ham. I don't think Jesus would

take that guy very seriously, nor do I. What we should take very seriously and surly Jesus does, is evil. When I look for evil, the first place I look is in me and in people. Tragically, evil is easy to find in people. If evil is in us and we want to look at what is referred to as the devil, the face of evil, we have a pretty good idea of who that looks like. Now if you think of evil as the red lizard guy, I'm fine with that but I do hope you get to the place where you are ready to confront the evil in you and in others, however you consider it to be. It is there and it is clever and it is nasty.

Temptations abound in and around us and do not seem to be interested in retreat, even the strategic kind. Evil retreated from Jesus knowing that its best opportunity is in us. The struggle with evil in the world begins with the struggle with evil within ourselves. That struggle begins with self-knowledge: knowing and acknowledging our limitations and our capabilities. We are limited in our abilities to resist temptations and we are capable of perpetrating evil. As soon as we accept these to be true about ourselves, the sooner we'll be able to confront them as Jesus did. This self-reflection should take place at all times with us, but Lent is the time in the church year when we pay more attention.

As Jesus prepared himself for the discipline of his ministry in the wilderness by confronting his temptations, we prepare ourselves for that ultimate renewal that comes to us and to the

world on Easter. We prepare ourselves by confronting our temptations and evil. We can't do that without owning our own sinfulness and being willing to plead for forgiveness. Psalm 51, verse 17 states, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart." There are many paths to Easter, but none of them escapes the shadow of the cross. The cross is the point where and when our eternal God and we mortals converge. It is the place where the finite is raised to the infinite and the infinite is brought down to the finite. It is Jesus Christ that makes this possible.

In the shadow of that cross we make our way, acknowledging who and what we are, sinners in need of God's forgiveness and the forgiveness of our brothers and sisters. All this we know. However, the devil, as they say, is in the details. Lent is the time to make a detailed inventory of our conscience. Where, when, how, and why we sin against God, our neighbors, and ourselves is the beginning of the Lenten path. Redemption starts with awareness of and acceptance of our sins. When we take responsibility for our sins and are genuinely contrite we can honestly and truthfully stand before the cross, and the cross is where we meet our God and our destiny. AMEN

