

A Homily: "The Temptation of Jesus and Us" Fr. Gary Coffey
Grace Episcopal Church, Asheville, N.C. March 9, 2014

As most of you know, this is the first Sunday of the season of Lent. Lent is made up of the 40 days prior to Easter Sunday, excluding Sundays because Sundays are always feast days, and the Season of Lent is a season of fasting. This is why people sometimes fast or do without something during Lent like coffee or sweets. The idea is twofold. First, it has to do with self-denial as an offering to God. Secondly, when we think of partaking of what we are denying ourselves, these moments are seen as prompts when we choose to turn our thoughts to our love for God.

We got this idea of the 40 days of Lent from the fact that Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness fasting during which time He was tested by the devil. Let's think together for a few minutes about Jesus' time of temptation and see what you and I can learn from his experience about resisting temptation in our lives.

One of the things that we notice about the devil's temptation of Jesus is that the devil is an opportunist. What this means is that the devil takes advantage of us and tempts us at our weakest point. Think about it. Jesus had gone without food for 40 days. He was weak and physically in need of food. So, observing this, the devil said to Jesus, "Hey, Jesus. If you are the Son of God, why don't you command these stones to be loaves of bread?" Of course, Jesus recognized that the devil was playing on his extreme weakness with this temptation and responded to the devil saying something like, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'"

As we think about this incident, perhaps we can recognize that temptation is going to hit us at our weakest point as well. Knowing this, we can be on our guard during those times of weakness. For example, you and someone you love are having a disagreement. You know that you are really angry. You also know that when you are really angry, you are more likely to say hurtful things that you don't mean out of that anger. Therefore, thinking about Jesus' experience with temptation, when you and I are really angry, in that weak spot, we need to be really careful about what comes out of our mouths. As Jesus was hit in his weak spot of hunger, we will no doubt be tempted in our weak spot of anger, or in whatever weak spots that we have in our lives. The takeaway here is to guard our weak spots, because that is where temptation strikes us.

The second thing that we can learn from not only that particular temptation, but from all three of the temptations of Jesus is the importance upon relying on our knowledge of Holy Scripture. In the second temptation, the devil is trying to beat Jesus at His own game. In the first temptation, Jesus quoted Scripture to justify his position. So, in the second temptation, the devil actually quotes Scripture to Jesus. After tempting Jesus to prove who He is by jumping off the pinnacle of the Temple, the devil says, "After all, Jesus, the Scripture says, 'He will command his angels concerning you' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" But Jesus, seeing through the devil's trick responds, "Again, it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

This incident underscores the importance of having a good working knowledge of God's Word. That way, we can be guided by God's will and God's way that we glean from our knowledge of the Scriptures. This is why I am always encouraging us to read a little Scripture and think about it every day. Of course the Forward Day by Day devotional is one of the easiest ways to do this. Look the passage up at the top of the page. Read it. Think about it. Then, read the little devotion for the day. I have mentioned that it is now available for about \$7.00 as an app for you phone. The app has a link to the Scripture readings for the day. Maybe this is something that you want to solidify into a habit during these days of Lent. It's a little thing, but as you can see from the temptation story, knowledge of God's Word to us can help us avoid a world of hurt as we follow God's Way of peace and joy rather than the way of temptation to sin.

And speaking of sin, this season of Lent is also a time of self-examination and prayer. Sin, sin, sin, the priest is always talking about sin. Why do we talk so much about sin? We talk so much about sin, Beloved, because sin makes us miserable. Yes, a knowledge of the Scriptures tells us that there is pleasure in sin "for a season". But, that pleasure only lasts for a season and then it is over, and it leaves us broken on the side of the road.

One of the things that I enjoy in life is movies. It's always dangerous to talk about a movie that you haven't seen, but I am going to do that anyway to make a point. There was a movie at the Fine Arts Theatre recently that I wanted to see, but missed it while it was here. It was called *The Great Beauty*. The trailer looked interesting. It was about a man in Rome, I think maybe he was a famous author. Anyway, this man had just turned 65 and, as I understand it, remember that I haven't seen and am not therefore recommending the movie to you. As I understand it, this man had lived his life as a sort of playboy there in Rome, and as he reflected on his life, he saw how empty it had been, and as it did so, he began to see for the first time the beauty of Rome and its people. It was, I think, a sort of conversion experience for him. It seemed that he had come to the end of that season of sin, and his eyes had been opened to behold what is truly beautiful in the world.

That's why the Church talks about sin, sin, sin. That is why we have the confession at almost every service. Sin, which might be defined as choosing the world's way or our own way over God's way ultimately disappoints us. God's way ultimately fulfills us. This is the truth of the Gospel. This is why Jesus "died for our sins", to remove them from us, as far as the east is from the west.

I read a poignant comment from Susanna Metz in this week's *Synthesis*. She wrote, "It's hard to preach on sin. Either we love using it to bludgeon our parishioners, or we dress it in softer colors." Yes, Susanna, how right you are! We either tend to beat our people over the head with sin or we dress it in softer colors, in effect explaining it away.

I am going to be ambitious this morning as a preacher, and try to do neither of these things. Rather, I am going to try and reflect with you about why we think Jesus is so doggoned concerned about sin, so concerned that He died on the cross to deal with it.

The problem with sin is that it separates us from the God of love. In doing so, it makes us subhuman, less than who we were created to be. You see, we were created and designed by God to be in perfect fellowship with God and to live in God's presence 24/7. One of the most beautiful reflections on this idea comes from Genesis where we are told that before sin entered the picture, Evidently, God used to walk with Adam and Eve in the cool of the evening. Can you think of anything more pleasant than that, humanity walking with God in a beautiful garden in the cool of the evening?

You see, Beloved, we were created to live in the presence of God. The reason sin is such a big deal is that it separates us from the fullness of God's presence. I'll tell you what it's like. It's like when something has gone wrong with our relationship with another person and has not been resolved. You know that uneasy feeling that you have when you are around another person and both of you know and feel that things are just not quite right. That's the effect sin has on our relationship with God.

And you know how you just hate that feeling, and you want it to be different. That must have been how our loving God felt toward us. And the Good News, no, the Great News of the Gospel is that God sent His Son to make things right again.

Through His death and resurrection, Jesus has made things right. He has repaired the brokenness. He has made things right with God again, as right as it was when God used to stroll with Adam and Eve in the Garden in the cool of the evening.

And so, Beloved, we get to live our lives in the presence of God, with no sin to impede or dampen that relationship. And when we do sin, we confess it and God forgives it, and the Scriptures say that God not only forgives us but that God remembers our sin no more. How good is that!?

In closing,

The reason that the Church makes such a big deal about sin is that we want to make sure that all the people of the earth get the news that whatever sin has been between God and us, Jesus has taken care of it on the Cross. As our reading from 2 Cor. for Ash Wednesday said so beautifully, "For our sake God made Christ to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." It's okay. God really does love each and every one of us, and all is forgiven, past, present and future. AMEN.