Spirituality
Scripture for Life



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March 10, 2019
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As we begin Lent, Luke tells us a story in which the challenge of tempting Jesus makes the devil so desperate that he actually imitates Jesus and quotes Scripture to induce him to betray his identity and vocation. Granted, the devil had exhausted two other approaches before resorting to mimicking his adversary. But being dead-set on his objective, poor old Diabolos dug into his enemy's treasure chest of wisdom in a last-ditch attempt to trip up Jesus.

Using Psalm 91, "Doby" (short for the Greek name Diabolos) said, in effect, "If God is all powerful and really loves you, nothing bad can happen to you, right? So prove it! Play superman and take a single bound off our tallest building! I want to see the response of those old angels I used fly with!"

Jesus answered as he had before — quoting the Scripture that Doby hated most because he knew why it was true: "You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test." Perhaps Doby remembered what he had learned when his best work with Job inadvertently generated Job's own growth in wisdom and holiness.

We should give the devil his due. Tempting Jesus was the challenge of a lifetime. Adam and Eve had been an easy practice round, but his work with them did set the ball rolling for a history of jealousy, hiding and lying — and the death and

destruction those inevitably lead to. But confronting Jesus was the real deal. Now, everything Doby and his minions had learned for thousands of years was coming to a head. This would be the decisive encounter.

Doby's first tack was to pervert the idea of being Son of God. Demoting the concept of sonship to the level of aristocratic entitlement, he suggested that Jesus should never have an unsatisfied appetite. Jesus' response doesn't deny human hungers, but informs Doby of a truth that the poor know well: There are things in life even more important that bread.

When he couldn't entice Jesus on the level of physical gratification, Doby turned to power. Now, he wasn't talking to Adam who wanted to taste an apple but the Adam who lusted to be as great as God. Luke gets in an extra lick against domination by quoting Doby's claim to have the right to distribute the power that rulers exert over others. In reply to Doby's offer of control, Jesus replies that he believes in an entirely different sort of power, and that he will dedicate himself to nothing and no one other than God. That consecration will be such a source of power and freedom that nothing else will ever entice him to accept less.

Doby's temptations were diabolical because he took normal human desires and blew them out of proportion in such a way that pursuing a natural good deteriorated into a perversion of the human vocation to love God and neighbor. When Jesus rejected the temptation to turn stones to bread, he rejected both the opportunity to devote his power to his own satisfaction and the impulse to feed the hungry without converting, and thereby saving, those who hoard the world's goods. His rejection of coercive power was proof of his great love and respect for humankind. Like God, he sought to increase human freedom as the only atmosphere in which real love can grow.

In the third round, using the Temple itself as a prop, Doby used a quote from Psalm 91 to undermine the very purpose of prayer and covenant. His suggestion was that Jesus should attempt to manipulate God by attempting to force God into action. Jesus' response was that God expresses love on divine terms not according to a puny human agenda.

Each of the evangelists preserved this story for us with his own emphases and rationale. Mark's, as usual, is the starkest, and Matthew's has its own rhythm as the temptations build. Luke puts Jerusalem at the climax of this story, just as he

organizes his Gospel as Jesus' road to Jerusalem and climax of his death and resurrection. What are we to take away from it?

Jesus' temptations centered on how he would assume and grow in his identity as God's beloved, fully human son. The temptations to selfishness, power and manipulating God, were surely as real in his life as they are in our own. Luke tells us that at the end of the temptations, the devil left Jesus "for a time." This scene in the desert reminds us that the powers of evil never tire of offering cheap, attractive and corrupt ways to fulfill our real human needs for sustenance, self-expression and genuine relationship with God and others. The Son of God chose to enter into the struggle. Lent is our annual opportunity to do the same.

DEUTERONOMY 26:4-10

This reading from Deuteronomy describes a liturgy. Something of a summary of things that have been said before, this puts the people's offerings in the context of their history, so that the liturgy will remind them of who they are, where they came from, and how they have come to the point of being able to offer something to God.

The context for what we hear comes from long after Moses' death. The people making this kind of offering have had time to settle and grow crops in the land that Moses only saw from a distance. (See Deuteronomy 34) Although they entered the land with jubilance, they gradually lost the sense of wonder at all they had been given and saved from. This ceremony is designed to remind them of who they are as a people blessed by God.

When people have worked the land, built their homes, and established their society, it is easy for them to lose touch with their hardscrabble origins. The wealth they have accumulated begins to appear more natural than miraculous, they can take their freedom for granted rather than recognize it as a free gift. Unfortunately, even this ceremony of remembering history can be interpreted as an account of accomplishment rather than a gift of grace.

Moses' instructions aim at overcoming the tendency to forget the past by framing the people's offerings in the context of their history of poverty, suffering and salvation. Rather than consider their accomplishments or even anything they did to produce the goods they offer, the bulk of this ceremony reminds them of their impoverished past.

Once they were wanderers. When they thought they had found a place of refuge, they became slaves. They suffered for generations. They cried to the Lord, and their God beheld all that they were going through and led them out of slavery into a place where they could thrive. Only because of that do they have the privilege of offering the first fruits.

This reading has great potential to orient us as we enter the 40 days of preparation for Easter. It reminds us that the sacrifices we make are to be sacrifices of praise; it calls us to become ever more mindful of the reasons for our gratitude to God. The Israelites understood their national history as salvation history. Their arrival in the promised land was both a political and a religious event. A primary reason for remembering their background was to engender compassion for others who suffered as they had. The injunction of Exodus 22:20, “You shall not oppress or afflict a resident alien, for you were once aliens,” is but one of more than 50 references to aliens in the Torah.

As people of the United States, we might take a page out of their book and recall our ancestors’ reasons for coming to America. There would be very few of us whose forebearers immigrated for motives very different from the Israelites’ need to escape a situation of oppression. Just as they were to remain mindful of their humble background, so too we would do well to remember from whence we have come and how little we have done to deserve what has been given to us. Our past calls us to have compassion on the immigrant and refugee.

This reading puts Lent in the context of salvation history and reminds us that our own history should be the springboard for us to treat others as God has treated us, to see the good that we have as a reminder of what we can give, not what we have made for or of ourselves. Our ancestors would tell us that what they had made of themselves left them in slavery in Egypt. God made them a people capable of giving.

PSALM 91:1-2, 10-11, 12-13, 14-15

In his book, The Psalms, Song of Faith and Praise, Benedictine Fr. Gregory Polan tells us that “When someone in need prays with confident trust in God’s ways, divine love inevitably responds, bringing a sense of salvation and protection to the one who prays.” That might tell us all we need to know about this psalm.

The first obvious reason for using Psalm 91 for today's liturgy is that the devil quotes it. What the devil might not have been counting on was the fact that Jesus would hear him out and then give his own interpretation of the psalm. The demonic interpretation of the psalm claims that God will keep good people from all harm.

The practical problem with that is that real life seems to prove it wrong: Evil people seem to prosper as often as the innocent suffer. The theological problem with that interpretation is that it contradicts the essence of the preaching of the cross and Jesus' resurrection. The God of the Christian Scriptures enters into the heart of suffering and evil in order to transform rather than avoid it.

Today's refrain interprets our psalm in relation to our readings and our lives. When we pray, "Be with me, Lord, when I am in trouble," we are inviting God to transform us and our world. That opens us to a permanent solution rather than an escape hatch.

ROMANS 10: 8-13

"If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." This selection from Romans orients us to Lent in a rather unexpected way. Just when tradition would have us thinking about what we should do to make these 40 days fruitful, Paul calls us to grow in faith rather than works. This takes the emphasis off ourselves and calls us to discover God's presence in our hearts and in the thoughts and words that spring from inside us.

This sounds like the inspiration that led Martin Luther to critique a church that had grown sterile through activities that failed to involve people at the level of heart and soul. A superficial understanding of Paul's statement also makes it seem like magic. If we interpret this to mean that all we have do to be saved is to repeat a saying, we will end up in worse religious shallowness than that which caused Luther to call for the Reformation.

When we look at what Paul is really saying, we discover something much more profound. Paul's word "confess," (homologeo in Greek) implies saying something in company with another. It is more like a promise or vow than the simple articulation of some words. It refers to something we say with one another, something to which we agree. Among other things, that reminds us that we set out on this Lenten journey together, as interdependent pilgrims rather than lone rangers.

Another dimension of Paul's message in this saying is that faith has real effects. To believe that Jesus is Lord means to believe that his life, death and resurrection reveal God's very being and God's immeasurable love. The more we believe in God's love for us, for each of us individually, the more we realize that sharing God's love is what life is all about. According to Paul, salvation is the transformation that happens in us as we come to understand that.

LUKE 4:1-13

The First Sunday of Lent always features Jesus' temptation in the desert, and today, we hear Luke's rendition of the story. Luke carefully presents this incident in conjunction with what came before it and as a foretaste of what is to come in the rest of his Gospel.

Luke sets the scene by connecting Jesus' baptism with what follows immediately thereafter. At the baptism, Jesus heard the divine voice call him "Son." Now, filled with the Spirit, he is led into the desert to be tempted. These 40 days recall Israel's desert sojourn, the 40 days Moses spent fasting and writing down God's law (Exodus 34:28), and Elijah's 40-day walk to the place where he would meet God (1 Kings 19:8). Those three events provide the backdrop for Jesus' 40 days in the desert.

The devil frames two of his attempts to tempt Jesus as challenges to his status as Son of God. In the first, the devil suggests that the Son of God should never suffer hunger, but rather use his power to provide for himself. When Jesus answers that he does not live by bread alone, it is no vow to live hungry. (Remember, the Gospels are much more apt to portray Jesus as frequenting banquets than foregoing food — he even defends his disciples who break Sabbath restrictions to get a snack.) The point of Jesus' response about bread is not to promote fasting, but a declaration that he believes in God's providence more than in his own desires or plans. John 4:34 underlines the same idea when Jesus tells his disciples, "My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to finish his work." This is not a question of eating, but of relating to God as a trusting, obedient son.

The second temptation includes a good dose of irony as the devil claims power over all the kingdoms of the world. Scripture proclaims that God rules all the nations (See Psalms 22:28-29, 103:19, and Zechariah 14:9), and even in this verse, the devil only claims that "it has been handed over to me" to distribute, thus admitting that he does not have full control. Ultimately, this is a temptation to worship power —

whether by directly dedicating himself to acquiring it or indirectly through collaboration with or submission to demonic power. Jesus' response, taken from Deuteronomy as was his first, is that only God deserves worship. Nothing else is valuable enough to merit his dedication.

The third temptation, to leap off the Temple parapet, goes to the heart of religion and Jesus' own life journey that culminated in the holy city. This can be seen as a temptation to manipulate God or to use religion as an insurance policy. Ultimately, it suggests the hope or belief that God's own will never suffer — a theory that is untenable in light of the lives of the prophets and undone by the Book of Job.

Jesus' temptations are prototypes of every individual's temptations and the things that can destroy the life of any community, including the church. Jesus' responses offer guidelines, reminding us of the implications of claiming our status as children of God. When it comes to bread, we have every reason to trust in God's providence.

When we experience the desire or opportunity to exercise power, Jesus teaches us how to ask, "Whom does it serve?" Finally, he shows us that faith is an invitation to growth in relationship, not an insurance policy or a tool to manipulate God.

Planning: First Sunday of Lent

By Lawrence Mick

Some questions to consider as we begin Lent:

- What are the sounds and visual cues of Lent? When parishioners enter this Sunday, will they know immediately that things are different? The Ceremonial of Bishops puts the matter simply and directly: "During Lent the altar is not to be decorated with flowers, and the use of musical instruments is allowed only to support the singing. The Fourth Sunday of Lent, Laetare Sunday, solemnities, and feasts are exceptions to this rule" (# 252). Do you take these rules seriously? Is the altar unadorned? Do you use green plants that don't flower? Does the music seem different? Are instrumental pieces put away for the season? If accompaniment is necessary, is it simpler or even minimal? The point is not to make worship a negative experience but to call our people into the seriousness of the season. A simpler environment encourages reflection,

repentance, conversion and renewal. Creating and sustaining a worship environment that does this can help parishioners to enter more fully into the season.

- What is the purpose of Lent? Our official books say that Lent is both baptismal and penitential. It is designed to help those preparing for baptism (and confirmation and Eucharist) to complete their preparation by deepening their conversion. At the same time, it calls all the faithful to deepen their own conversion and recommit themselves to living out their baptismal promises.
- Is Lent individual or communal? Since Lent is observed liturgically, it clearly has a communal dimension. This is a church-wide observance seeking deeper conversion. That certainly includes examination of our personal lives and seeking to improve our efforts to live according to the Gospel. But there is clearly more to consider than individual sin and virtue. If this is our annual parish retreat, how does it change the behavior of the parish? Do we not need to focus on our communal sinfulness as well as individual failings? What kind of questions are presented to the parish to foster this broader awareness of our responsibilities as a community of the baptized?

Consider today's readings in this light. The first reading reminds us that the Israelites were aliens in a foreign land. The second reading insists there is no distinction between Jew and Greek. How do these texts speak to us about refugees and immigrants today? Will we let them challenge us to change?

The Gospel recounts the temptations of Christ. Can we face the ways that we, individually and communally, give in to the lure of wealth, power and status? Can the church repent of its communal sins and beg God's forgiveness? Planners could craft petitions based on those temptations — perhaps pairs of intentions to address our personal weaknesses and our communal failings.

Prayers: First Sunday of Lent

By Sue Robb

Introduction

Trust. Trouble. Temptation. The Israelites remembered and trusted in God's constant, guiding presence and gave back to God the first fruits of the land. The psalmist trusted God would be present in times of trouble. Jesus survived temptation in the desert, only by trusting in God. In whom or in what do we place our trust when we are troubled and tempted?

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, with your eyes always set on God, you accomplished all that was asked of you: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, forgive us for the times we are tempted and fail to trust: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, restore us to wholeness of faith as we journey with you to the cross: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider We come before you, God of mercy, with our troubles and temptations, trusting you will strengthen us and hear and answer our prayers.

Minister We come before you, God of mercy, with our troubles and temptations, trusting you will strengthen us and hear and answer our prayers, we pray:

- For a spirit of cooperation between nations; safety for those fleeing oppression and danger; and for policies and borders that welcome the stranger, we pray:
- For all who are incarcerated; for those imprisoned by addictions to drugs, alcohol, gambling, technology or pornography; for adequate funding in the treatment processes; and for healing for all victims, we pray:
- For us as we begin this Lenten journey: for strength to overcome temptations that hurt our relationship with God, others and creation; for reconciliation of all broken relationships; and for a greater awareness of Jesus' presence in our lives, we pray:
- For greater appreciation for the "milk and honey" that flows through all creation; for a stronger desire to protect our natural resources; for a deeper awareness to see the interconnectedness of all life, we pray:
- For first responders who assist in times of trouble; for all who are sick in mind, body and spirit; for all who have died and will die alone today, we pray:

Presider God, we call out to you. You hear our cry and see our affliction, our toil and our oppression. Let us journey this Lent seeing as you see, and trusting that with

your help, we can right our relationships and our world. We ask this through Jesus your Son. Amen.

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