Opinion



"The Temptation of Christ by the Devil," a 12th-century fresco transferred to canvas (Metropolitan Museum of Art)



by Thomas Gumbleton

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March 5, 2020

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First Sunday of Lent

March 1, 2020

Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7

Psalms 51

Romans 5:12-19 or 5:12, 17-19

Matthew 4:1-11

This Gospel lesson is intended to give us hope and encouragement in the face of evil, temptation and sin. The Scripture commentators remind us when we reflect on this Gospel lesson that all the words that Jesus says come from the book of Deuteronomy, the book of law written by Moses, according to tradition. What is happening is that Jesus is reversing what happened when Adam and Eve failed in the very beginning and did not follow God's way.

Then the chosen people traveled through the desert for those 40 years, during which they had made a covenant with God: I will be your God, and you will be my people. But that covenant was based on following God's commands. Time after time, the chosen people failed. But now Jesus comes and he is the one that overcomes that failure of Adam and Eve, the failure of the chosen people and the failure of our human race to follow the way of God.

He shows us clearly how we must do that in the few brief temptations of today's Gospel. At the end of this event for Jesus in Mark's Gospel, he remarks how the devil left him for a time. Throughout his life, Jesus was tempted in a variety of ways not to follow the way God had designed for him. He was tempted. He was human like us in every way except sin. He overcame those temptations in the desert and every other time. We have to learn from Jesus because of course, evil enters our life. At times we choose what is not good for ourselves; we choose what is evil and we go against the way of God. We have to learn from Jesus.

The examples in the Gospel today are clearly examples that happen in our everyday life. We're tempted to misuse material things. That was the first temptation of Jesus: "Turn these stones into bread. You're the Son of God. Have all you want — everything. It's all yours." Sometimes we act that way too. We want more and more and more. We live in a society where we're constantly given that message: You need this; you need that — the newest, the best, the greatest. Do we really need all those things, especially if they deprive others of the barest necessities because we have more than we need, and we fail to share it?

Jesus says to the devil, "You don't live by bread alone. No, you live by the word of God." We, in our own lives, have to find a way to listen deeply to this word of God, take it in, absorb it and let it change us. In the liturgy for Ash Wednesday, one of the lessons was from the book of the prophet Isaiah about fasting where the prophet challenges the people, "Would you call this a fast, a day acceptable to God? Is not this the kind of fast that pleases me: to break the fetters of injustice and untie the thongs of the yoke, set the oppressed free? Is it not to share your food with the hungry, to bring into your house the homeless, to clothe the naked when you find them, and not to turn away from your own kin?"

That's what fasting means during Lent. It would mean welcoming people fleeing danger, a terrible life, looking for refuge. It would mean changing our life patterns to some extent, having less so others can have enough. That's what Isaiah tells us. That's what fasting is during this season of Lent. In that second temptation, which again, is simply one example of how we could be tempted. It also was treated by Jesus himself in that Sermon on the Mount, toward the end of it where he talks about prayer and how we should all pray every day, obviously.

But also Jesus says you don't call attention to yourself. That was that second temptation — calling attention to yourself, "See how good I am." No, Jesus said, "When you pray, go apart, by yourself. Don't be like the rabbis who like to stand in a public place so everyone sees them pray. No, go apart and pray with God alone and that prayer will truly affect and change you."

Finally, when the devil tempts Jesus: "You can have all the kingdoms of the earth, all the power, all the wealth — everything if you adore me." Of course, Jesus says, "No! Be gone, Satan." This really tipped him over the edge, you would think. "Get out of here!" We adore the Lord our God alone. We don't put false gods out in front of us that we follow. We listen to God's word deeply and obey that word and follow Jesus

faithfully. That is what we're called to do now during this season of Lent.

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As Jesus resisted those temptations of the devil and chose to follow the will of God alone, we must try to go with him, listen to what he says, follow how he acts, imitate him in every way we can. That means, maybe in a very practical way, to be here at church every Sunday, come after having read the lessons and listened on your own to hear the lessons listened to by all of us together. Gradually, if we do that faithfully, we will be following the way of Jesus.

We will overcome evil in our lives, individually and personally, but also we will be working together to transform our world from a world where evil seems so rampant, into a world that God intends it to be, a world where there's peace, forgiveness and love. Those are of Christ — peace, forgiveness and love. A faithful participation in Lent will help us to bring that into our lives and into the world around us. Listen deeply, watch carefully and follow Jesus.

Editor's note: *This homily was given March 1 at St. Ambrose Church in Grosse Pointe Park, Michigan. The transcripts of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. Sign up here to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.*