

Gen. 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Rom. 5:12-19; Matt. 4:1-11  
First Sunday in Lent

## Spiritual Temptations\*

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There are some weeks in which it's not entirely clear how the various scripture readings fit together. That is, sometimes it's a challenge to figure out what exactly the creators of the lectionary had in mind when they paired the Hebrew Bible reading with the epistle reading and the gospel reading.

This is *not* one of those weeks.

It couldn't be clearer that the theme for today, the First Sunday in Lent, is temptation with a capital T.

The collect of the day asks God to help those of us who are "assaulted by many temptations." The Hebrew Bible reading is taken from the third chapter of the Book of Genesis, and it tells the story of the fall of Adam and Eve after they were tempted by the serpent to eat of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden.

The epistle reading from the Letter to the Romans is the apostle Paul's take on the Adam and Eve story. This passage is also the basis upon which the fourth-century theologian Augustine of Hippo developed his theology of original sin. Augustine reads Paul as saying that we have all inherited the sin of Adam from the moment we are born: "As sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all." According to Augustine, original sin is like a virus that spreads from generation to generation – and thus all of us are infected with the temptation to sin.

Finally, the gospel reading from Matthew tells the story of Jesus' temptation by the devil in the wilderness. Jesus is tempted three times: first, to turn stones into loaves of bread; second, to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple; and third, to be given all of the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. Each time, Jesus turns the devil's words against him, and refuses to give into temptation. The devil finally leaves Jesus, and the angels come and wait on him.

It's not surprising that we're focusing on temptation today. This past Wednesday – Ash Wednesday – was the first day of the forty-day liturgical season of Lent. Traditionally, Lent has been a season of self-examination, repentance, fasting, and self-

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denial: all practices relating to temptation. And temptation shows up in this morning's Great Litany, with its reference to our "inordinate and sinful affections."

Growing up in the Roman Catholic Church, I experienced Lent each year as a time of spiritual struggle against temptation. Giving up meat on Fridays was not enough. We had to do something *even more* to demonstrate our mastery over temptation. The question was always, "What are you giving up for Lent?"

I recently came across a fascinating website called the "2014 Twitter Lent Tracker." Twitter, as you may know, is the social media tool that allows you to broadcast your thoughts – or tweets – to the entire world in real time. The one catch is that each tweet is limited to 140 characters. Twitter is what Ellen used to post her celebrity photo, or selfie, from the Oscars that was retweeted over a million times in a single hour.

Anyway, the "2014 Twitter Lent Tracker" website analyzed around a quarter million tweets during the past week and compiled the top 100 things given up for Lent around the world. Of the top five things, it's surprising how many have to do with temptation. Can you guess what they are? Chocolate, alcohol, swearing, and Twitter itself.

Now I have nothing against the spiritual practices of moderation or self-improvement. But often times the notion of "giving up something" – whether that something is sweets, junk food, coffee, sex, or even Facebook – can turn spirituality into a dualistic battle between the spirit and the body, in which the spirit and asceticism is always good and the body and pleasure is always bad.

The problem, of course, with such a dualistic understanding of temptation is that it undermines the good news of the Gospel – that God became one of us in the incarnation and that the Word was made flesh. And that flesh is fundamentally good.

Today's gospel reading is actually helpful in that it provides a more nuanced understanding of temptation. The late great spiritual writer Henri Nouwen wrote a wonderful little book called *In the Name of Jesus* about Jesus' three temptations in the wilderness.

According to Nouwen, Jesus' three temptations – of turning stones into bread, of throwing himself off the pinnacle of the temple, and of being given the kingdoms of the earth in all their splendor – are not so much about bodily temptations, but rather are about the *spiritual* temptations that we all face in living the Christian life. Specifically, these are the temptations to be relevant, to be spectacular, and to be powerful.

First, there is the temptation to be relevant. We want to be able to turn stones into loaves of bread. We often judge our worth as members of society – and as followers of Jesus – based upon how many people we've helped, whether it's through our volunteer work, our donations to nonprofit organizations, or our church ministries. The busier we are, the more useful we feel. We are tempted to be relevant. But it's easy to forget that

Jesus ministered to others, first and foremost, through the quality and authenticity of his relationships, and not just by what he was doing for those around him. Jesus didn't have to worry about being relevant because he was busy being himself.

Second, there is the temptation to be spectacular. Let's face it, we all want to be fabulous, like jumping off of the pinnacle of the temple – especially if someone has taken a photo of us and posted it to Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram. Look at my selfie – I'm spectacular! (Hold on – I'm having an Ellen moment. Say cheese!) We want to be famous and be known for our wonderful sermons, our brilliant teaching and writing, or our large number of adoring congregants. (Or maybe that's just me.) We are tempted to be spectacular. But it's easy to forget that Jesus died as a dismal failure, as a convicted criminal who was abandoned at the cross by nearly all of his family and friends.

Third, there is the temptation to be powerful. We want to be given the kingdoms of the world in all of their splendor. This might take the form of traditional power, such as how many people report to us at work or how much money we make. Or this might take the form of other more subtle forms of power, such as always getting our way in our relationships, whether through influence, persuasion, manipulation, or seduction. We are tempted to be powerful. But it's easy to forget that Jesus and his followers were derided for being weak – and, in fact, powerless – by the standards of the Greco-Roman world.

So why are we tempted to be relevant, to be spectacular, and to be powerful? The 20th century ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr – who is best known for reinterpreting Augustine's doctrine of original sin for our own time – has argued that spiritual temptations arise out of our existential anxiety. That is, we are anxious because we know that we are finite creatures and that we will one day die. Like Adam and Eve, we want to live forever, and thus we are seduced by false promises of eternal life. And so we try to raise ourselves up over God and others, whether that means being more relevant, more spectacular, or more powerful.

Ironically, the antidote to spiritual temptation is not to try harder – that just leads to more anxiety. Rather, the appropriate response to temptation is to let go and to deepen our trust in God. As the saying goes, "Let go, and let God." Letting go of our existential anxieties is actually something worth "giving up" for Lent.

The word Lent is derived from the Old English and German words for "lengthening." That is, Lent is a time when spring is coming and the days get longer and longer. This lengthening happens without any prompting or work from us. In fact, there is absolutely nothing that we *can* do to make this happen. (Although changing the clock from daylight savings time to standard time does help.) We just need to trust in God that the days will get longer and warmer.

And that's the real lesson from today's Gospel reading about Jesus' three temptations in the wilderness. It's not that we need to be more relevant, spectacular, or powerful. The fact is that we are *already* relevant. We are *already* spectacular. We are *already* powerful. We are already all of these things, because we are made in the image

of a God who is love, and who loves us to the point of becoming flesh in order to be with us – literally “Emmanuel.”

And once we realize this lesson – how much we are loved by God – our spiritual temptations, like the devil, will leave us, and the angels will come and wait on us.

May you have a deeply meaningful Lent, and may you realize how relevant, how spectacular, and how powerful you already are in the eyes of God. Let go, and let God.

+Amen.