

## **A Sermon for The First Sunday in Lent, February 21, 2010**

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The gospel (Matthew 4:1f.) says that the Holy Spirit led Jesus into temptation. “Then was Jesus led by the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted.” This seems a bit strange, for we pray, “Lead us not into temptation.” Here the Holy Spirit does with Jesus the very thing we ask not to be done with us.

When we read the Bible carefully, we discover that God has always tested his people—he has always, in a sense, led us into temptation. He created the first man and woman and placed them in a garden paradise. Then he stuck a forbidden tree in the middle of it to test whether they would obey him or not. God saved Israel from bondage in Egypt, then immediately led the people into the wilderness for a time of testing (Deuteronomy 8:2).

We can look at temptation from two points of view. The devil, who is called the tempter, tests us with the express purpose of getting us to fail. But God allows us to be tested because he wants our faith in him to be proved genuine. From the devil’s point of view, a temptation is a trap, a snare, an attempt to “get” us. From God’s point of view, temptation is meant to reveal that our faith is genuine.

The Spirit led Jesus in the wilderness to be tested in order to show that Jesus is the true Son of God and the New Man. The Spirit led Jesus into these tests to reveal his true character. To be sure, the devil intended to undermine the vocation of Jesus. But he was unable to do so. God used the devil for God’s own purposes.

We cannot avoid temptation. We cannot avoid facing circumstances in which our behavior will reveal our faith or lack thereof. This is God’s will for his people. When we pray, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,” we are asking that we would not be overcome by the temptation. We are saying, “Don’t throw us out there all alone with the devil in the wilderness.”

Simon Peter is an example. Just before his arrest in the garden, Jesus said, “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren” (Luke 22:31-32). Peter would be tested, but Jesus would not abandon him. By grace, Peter would be restored and strengthened.

The temptation of Jesus took place immediately after his baptism. The Spirit descended upon him, declaring him to be God’s Son. Then the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tested. This follows the pattern of the people of Israel, who experienced a kind of baptism in the Red Sea before being led into their time of wilderness testing. Our vocation is the same. We are baptized into Christ and given the Spirit. Then we are tested.

Israel and Jesus represent two contrasting patterns. Israel failed miserably in the wilderness while Jesus passed the test with flying colors. In Psalm 95, God described his exasperation with Israel:

Forty years long was I grieved with this generation, and said, It is a people that do err in their heart, and they have not known my ways: Unto whom I swear in my wrath that they should not enter into my rest (Psalm 95:9-11).

God's displeasure with Israel's unfaithfulness stands in contrast with his assessment of Jesus at his baptism. "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased" (Matthew 3:17). It was the vocation of Jesus to succeed where Israel and Adam failed. The pattern of Israel represents the pattern of fallen man. Fallen man is given the commandments of God, but in time of testing proves unfaithful to them. The pattern of Jesus is the pattern for our redemption. Filled with the Holy Spirit, we now have the strength and grace we need to faithfully endure our times of trial.

This is what we must continually keep in mind when we are tested. God intends for us to pass the test, and God will give us the grace we need to be faithful. As 1 Corinthians says, "God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it" (10:13).

The tests we face in life are not God's way of trying to trip us up. The tests we face are God's way of revealing that we are really his children; and they are the ways that God builds up our spiritual strength. As St. James says, "Count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing" (James 1:2-4).

The gospel tells us that Jesus did not enter into his time of testing unprepared. He faced the devil after a time of fasting and prayer. We who are already grumbling under the weight of our lenten disciplines should note that Jesus ate nothing at all for forty days. This makes all of our lenten rules look luxurious by comparison. Of course, most of us would be ill advised to "try this at home." The point is that Jesus thought fasting and prayer were essential to his preparation for testing. If they were essential for Jesus, God sinless and only begotten Son, then surely they are all the more essential for us—if we want to be faithful when we are tested.

Lent calls us to renew and intensify our practice of spiritual disciplines. Lent call us to some practice of fasting and some increase in our practice of prayer. Lent calls us to read and meditate on the Scriptures. Lent calls us to identify our besetting sins, make a good confession and cultivate the corresponding virtues. Lent calls us to watchfulness; that is, to be on the lookout for the kinds of traps and snares—the tests—the devil is laying out for us.

Spiritual disciplines are to temptation what studying is to a student taking a test and what exercise and practice are to an athlete competing in a game. When we fast and pray, when we turn from self towards God, we gain spiritual strength. We become more able to resist temptation and endure faithfully through times of trial.

Often we want to draw closer to God, but we lack the urgent motive. The church gives us Lent and says, in the words of St. Paul, "Now is the accepted time. Now is that day of salvation" (the epistle, 2 Corinthians 6:1f.). Now is the time to get ready for Easter and the Resurrection. Now is the opportunity to do new things, to face our tests in new and faithful ways that reveal that we are God's children and heirs of his kingdom.