

### “Desert Days”

We are four days into Lent, and I bet that some of us are in a quandary. On or before Ash Wednesday we decided what we might abstain from for the duration of Lent or what spiritual practice or service opportunity we might take on. I find that in the first days of Lent I am either very zealous and I am keeping up with my intentions, or more often I am very forgetful and keep foiling my own good intentions breaking my fast or forgetting my new practice. There is also the in between where I intend to keep my promises, but I start bargaining with myself about them. For example, I might decide to give up sweets for Lent and then whittle it down to where instead of giving up all sweets I am only giving up a certain type of candy. This allows my sweet tooth to remain satisfied while feeling righteous that I have at least forgone some temptation. Never mind that my bargaining already means temptation has won out over my best intentions. But I do not want to dwell on what is done and left undone, I just want to remind you and me that we have another thirty-six days in Lent to live up to our best hopes for ourselves. Remember also that the Lord’s Day is a feast day when we can break our fast. The forty days of Lent do not include Sundays.

Instead, of guilt tripping all of us over our Lenten failures, I want to focus on today’s Gospel. On the first Sunday of Lent, we always hear a passage about Jesus’ sojourn in the wilderness from one of the three Synoptic Gospels. This year it is Matthew. He does not give us a lot of details about Jesus’ time until Satan comes on the scene. But before we jump into that let’s step back to the preceding passage, a passage we might have forgotten about because we heard it so long ago. It is the passage that we heard on the First Sunday after the Epiphany. Does anyone remember what Gospel lesson we heard on that day? Let me give you a hint, the First Sunday after the Epiphany is also called The Baptism of our Lord. Now do you remember? OK that was a gimme. We heard the passage about Jesus being baptized by John in the Jordan River.

Here is another memory test. As Jesus comes up out of the water what does he hear? Yes, he hears a voice from heaven saying “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”<sup>1</sup> Then right after that Matthew tells us that Jesus is drawn by the Holy Spirit to go into the wilderness for forty days of fasting, prayer, and reflection. What an abrupt change. Jesus has been baptized and receives the revelation that he is beloved of God. The next thing is not a celebration as we often do for one who is newly baptized. Instead, he is compelled to go into a wasteland where he will fast and pray on what that revelation means for him and his life. It is radical and demanding.

Then as his days in the wilderness are coming to an end, when he is famished, weak, and exhausted from the ordeal Satan comes to tempt him. Like the serpent in Genesis Satan is a crafty tempter. He has not one but three temptations planned for Jesus that play on the most vulnerable aspects of being human.

The first temptation is for food. Like any human being after a long fast Jesus was hungry. How bad would it have been as the beloved son of God to turn a couple of stones into bread to satisfy his hunger? I expect his tempter realized that question might cross Jesus’ mind. Satan also realized that if Jesus gives in to that one small temptation it could make him more vulnerable to a bigger one. Yet, Jesus, despite his hunger, was perceptive enough to realize this. His days of meditation and prayer in the

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 3:17 NRSV

wilderness were not for naught. He remembers that the Word of God is more life sustaining than mere bread. Thus, he turns down Satan's invitation

Satan then ups the ante and takes Jesus to the heights of the Temple. Imagine a place as high as the highest spire on a cathedral or standing on the tiptop of the Washington Monument. I get anxious just visualizing it. The idea conjures up all my concerns about being safe and protected from harm. Who will keep me safe? That existential question is what Satan's temptation is about. I can hear Satan challenging him, "You think you are the beloved of God. Show me." For Jesus, whose status as beloved son of God may seem like a distant memory, the temptation is to prove that status by freefalling to earth. Satan even quotes scripture specifically Psalm 91<sup>2</sup> to support the temptation. Saying that God will not allow his foot to be dashed upon a stone. Jesus bests him by quoting scripture back at him, saying "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"<sup>3</sup>

The tempter, having failed twice, has one more trick up his sleeve. He goes for the most vulnerable place in the human heart—the ego. He offers Jesus everything in the world if he just bows down to worship him. This is the story told time and again in human history. When someone sells his soul to the devil in order to get great riches, youth, talent, or power. Think Goethe's *Faust* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde in literature. Think about Stalin, Hitler, Napoleon, Caesar, and so many others. Think the likes of medieval popes, or current priests and ministers who give up their souls for wealth, power, or lust. We do not know if they make actual deals with the devil, but it sure seems like they sold their soul to someone or something to try to get the power that they desired. They did much evil to be on top, but it did not last, and their legacy is not fame but infamy.

Jesus did not give in to these temptations, yet as humans we often do even when we have the best of intentions. So I guess the answer is Jesus is perfect and we are not? Actually, I don't think that is the point at all. Rather we can see that we will face temptations throughout our lives. Some of them will be trivial, and some of them will be great. We can give in to our most base desires without a thought or we can build our awareness of how to resist temptation.

One of my favorite television shows of all time is "Homicide: Life on the Street." Set in Baltimore it followed a group of detectives searching not just to solve a case but for the truth in their lives and in the world. At one-point Detective Tim Bayliss is arguing with Detective Frank Pembleton about virtue. Bayliss believes that life is black and white. Pembleton sees the world in many shades of gray. He also asserts that we have to know our dark side—our vices and desires—to really know who we are. He concludes by saying, "Virtue is not virtue until it slams up against vice. Consequently, your virtue is not virtue until it has been tested and tempted."<sup>4</sup>

Lent, if we accept the challenge, puts us in that wilderness where our virtues and our truth can be tested and tempted. As Debie Thomas wrote, "Lent is not a time to do penance for being human. It's a time to embrace all that it means to *be* human. Human and hungry. Human and vulnerable. Human and beloved."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Satan quotes Psalm 91:11-12

<sup>3</sup> Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 6:16

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PchsUAmzucl>

<sup>5</sup> Debie Thomas <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2541-tempted>