

“The First Temptation of Christ”

I remember growing up with Looney Tunes cartoons. I watched them every Saturday morning. They were funny for the predictability of Wile E. Coyote’s failures to catch the Road Runner, Elmer Fudd’s being outwitted by the “pesky wabbit,” and Tweety Bird’s insouciant manner as he battled Sylvester. The pranks, the art, and the pratfalls were great fun. They warranted watching over and over again.

I outgrew the cartoons in the tween years, only to come back to them as an adult. When I did I was startled. These were not just slapstick shows, they were sophisticated. There was adult humor, innuendo, and social and political critique that went right over my head as a child. Now they were fresh and funny for the other layers of humor and meaning that I was picking up.

In some ways today’s Gospel lesson is like those very familiar cartoons. We all know this gospel story, because we have heard it so often we can almost recite it. Jesus, having been baptized, is driven by the Holy Spirit into the Judean desert or wilderness. There he spends “forty days and forty nights” fasting and praying. At the end of the forty days the Devil comes to tempt him with food, specialness, and power. Jesus, being God’s anointed, does not give in. The Devil disappears and Angels arrive to take care of Jesus, further assuring us that he is God’s favorite. All’s well that ends well. Now Jesus can start his ministry. But like an adult watching Looney Tunes again, this story with a little background, becomes not only fresh but more powerful.

Jesus’ sojourned in the wilderness forty days. That is a long time to go without food and water. In fact, a human being cannot live without water for more than three days and without food for thirty days. One might think that, like a fish story, through repeated tellings Jesus’ time in the desert got longer and longer. While that is possible, forty is more important than that. Forty has links to several biblical stories. Noah and company were in the ark while it rained for forty days and forty nights. Moses went up mount Sinai to be with God for forty days. Moses and the Hebrews wandered in the wilderness for forty years. Forty is associated with encounters with God, and specifically when God is testing a person or a group. Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness is less about actually days and more about Jesus being part of the tradition of God testing someone’s faith.

When that test is over Jesus undergoes another test of his faith in God when he is tempted by the Devil. In response to each temptation Jesus quotes a passage from Deuteronomy. This puts us back into Moses’ recounting of the Exodus. When the wandering Israelites were tested they came up wanting. They did not trust that God would feed them, lead them to safety, or keep covenant with them. Jesus in contrast gives us the example of an appropriate response to testing from God by trusting that God will supply his needs, keep him safe, and provide him with strength enough. Additionally, unlike the wandering Hebrews Jesus also does not test God.

There is another connection with the exodus and that is specifically identifying Jesus with Moses the leader of the Jews during their journey. Matthew wants us to identify Jesus with the first great prophet who leads his people out of exile, saves them from an oppressor, and brings them in close relationship with God. These are all intended to give Jesus a specific image as savior and also to give each of his actions a raised platform from which they are to be heard. He is not just another Moses but he stands above Moses as a new and different savior. He can do all that Moses did and more.

A secular student of the Bible would find all of that interesting, but there has to be more for a person of faith. For a person of faith this story sets Jesus in a different light. All of the healing,

teaching, and preaching that Jesus does after this is not about proving his messiahship, but is a result of it. We do not need further proof than what is in the temptation pericope. Jesus' contemporaries who do not know the wilderness account have his divinity revealed in the subsequent passages of Matthew. Those of us who know the temptation story are further astounded by Jesus's wisdom and power. We also are confounded by the stubborn resistance to Jesus' ministry, and the foolishness of those who not only refuse to believe, but are also determined to kill him for all that he has done to reveal God to the world.

For us 2,000 years later we are called through the temptation story to look at our own lives. We are tempted every day, and sometimes the temptations are multitudinous. They come so quickly that we do not know when one ends and another begins. Often we are able to identify and stop before giving into a temptation. Other times we are worn down. Other times we do not even recognize the lure.

In C. S. Lewis' wonderful book *The Screwtape Letters*, Screwtape and his pupil Wormwood seek to wear down a human through self-absorption, pettiness, and false spirituality. Wormwood is to draw his human into a world that feeds his ego by encouraging the human's, "pride, vanity, selfishness and apathy."¹ It is very clever and those are just like the temptations that we all face throughout every day.

If we look back over our days we can identify the temptations and our responses. We can see where we have responded well and where we have given in. It is hard work, perhaps even harder than Jesus coming up with biblical responses for all of the Devil's scriptural justifications for the temptations; however, this is the work of our Lenten journey.

It is often recommended that we make a list of blessings at the end of each day. It is good to remember how God blesses us, but it can create a sense of entitlement. At the same time we need to examine how we are falling short. Remembering our blessings and our trials helps create a balance within ourselves. It helps us remember to whom we belong, and to whom our gratitude is to be directed. Otherwise we may become self-satisfied, self-congratulatory and end up wandering down the path that led the fallen angels out of heaven and in opposition to God.

Let us all make it a habit to examine our lives for temptations that drop by drop can transform us into a caricature of a Christian. Let us recall our God in heaven in whom "we live and move and have our being." The same God who sent Jesus, as the Word made flesh, to guide us on our earthly pilgrimage. The same one who blesses us each day, and who also asks us to share those blessings with others as Jesus did. Receiving a blessing is as much of a test as being tempted. We trust in God for our blessings and we pass those blessings on knowing that God has more to give each of us, more than we can ask or imagine.

¹ Maryetta Anschutz, in *Feasting on the Word* Year A, Volume 2, page 48.