

My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight. Our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

The first Sunday of Lent is always a temptation scripture. And although four of the five Sundays in Lent in the year of Matthew are paradoxically made up of passages from John's gospel, Lent 1 draws us to Matthew's vivid portrayal of Jesus' temptations. This portraiture sets the stage for much of what is to come in this gospel as well as the season of this year's Lent, no matter what Gospel we're following.

Matthew portrays Jesus as fasting as a righteous Jew should. He also has a different ordering of the Tempter's trials than the other Gospels, placing the temptation to worship the tempter as the culminating episode in the scene. This is important, because unlike the other Gospels it suggests that Jesus is not just to reject the specific temptation, but the Tempter himself.

The rejected temptations not only demonstrate that Jesus is righteous according to the law but also prove his identity as God's divine and beloved son. Indeed, Satan's

temptations get immediately to the core question of Jesus' identity, calling into question his relationship with God by beginning with the statement, "*If you are the Son of God....*". Now this happens just after Jesus has been confirmed as God's son at baptism, so we are led to believe that as the Holy Spirit descends at baptism, then leads Jesus into the Wilderness, tests await us in the world even as we are baptized. Even our Most Holy Son of God is tested immediately upon his entry into God's fold, and the Tempter wants to do some extreme vetting to figure out whether this guy will play along with the Tempter's goals for the kings and princes of the world or if Jesus is an unwelcome, undocumented new presence sent to cause trouble for the devil's work.

Now, individually, each temptation invites Jesus to turn away from trust in God in a different way. In the first, the devil invites Jesus to prove his sonship through a display of power; that is, by establishing his validity and worth through his own abilities. In the second, the temptation is to test God's fidelity and loyalty toward this "Son with whom I am Well-Pleased". The third temptation is just an out-and-out bribe. Jesus is

promised all the power and glory the earth can offer if he will give his allegiance and devotion to the Tempter.

And we know the end of the story, right? What is it? (pause). In each case, Jesus rejects the temptation and lodges his identity, future, and fortunes on God's character and trustworthiness. Not the stuff of a modern reality show for sure. Heck, even The Bachelor has three temptresses pulling at his heart. What will Nick do? Jesus could at least give us a little bit of worry and drama, right? But there's more to this story. And there's certainly enough human drama if we think biblically enough to begin to see it.

Matthew, in telling the story like this, has in mind the story of Israel's wandering in the wilderness. Jesus is a Moses figure, for Jesus in the wilderness for forty days, just as Moses was on the mountain with God for forty days after leading the Israelites into the wilderness. When tested, Jesus replies with Scriptural affirmations taken from Old Testament passages referencing the time in the wilderness and the miracle of the manna. In this sense, Jesus repeats the trials set before Israel in the wilderness. And just as Moses comes down from the

Mountain with God's word to lead the people, so Jesus begins his public ministry tested and confirmed in his identity.

Both Moses and Jesus fast during their time with God. Both are individually tempted in order to prove his trust in God and thereby his trustworthiness for the journey ahead. But where Israel failed the tests in the wilderness, Jesus did not. In this way, this scene not only links Jesus to the past of his ancestors, it marks him as superior to them and ready to inaugurate a new era in the ongoing history of God and the people of God.

While this allusion to Israel's history provides an important launch pad for Matthew's story of Jesus, the lectionary suggests another Scriptural echo and temptation: the story of Adam and Eve and the snake in the Garden of Eden. In some ways, this may prove the more interesting connection as it gets to the core of what it means to be human.

In our Genesis scripture, it is crucial to note that while Eve is the one who speaks, both Adam and Eve are present throughout the scene and are similarly invited to mistrust God.

And not many folks who try and remember this story from their years of Bible reading or Sunday School or wherever they think they know it do not recall this subtle but crucial detail. The serpent doesn't actually lie to Adam and Eve. He tells them they won't die, and they, in fact, do not die. And they do become more like God as God acknowledges.

But the temptation present in this scripture is this: the serpent calls into question God's trustworthiness by suggesting that there is more to the story than God let on. The serpent takes away the belief of Adam and Eve that God knows what's good for us always. The serpent sows the seeds of mistrust, inviting Adam and Eve to fulfill the deep want and need that is at the core of being human not through their relationship with God but by seizing the fruit that is in front of them. It is the temptation to be self-sufficient, to establish their identity on their own, that seduces these first biblical humans. Separation from God's promises might eventually lead to separation from God's purposes, and then separation from belief in God altogether. All because they believed in order to be complete, they must do this on their own.

Identity is again the focus of the Tempter in the scene of Jesus' temptation. "*If you are the Son of God,*" Satan begins. In other words, "How do you know you are God's Son?" Hence the core of the temptation: "Wouldn't it be better to know for certain? Turn stone to bread, jump from the Temple, worship me...and you will never know doubt again. You will know. You will be sufficient on your own." The temptation is the same as in the Garden of Eden, to establish an identity that fits a little light in the gap created between I and thou, Me and Thee. But Jesus responds by refusing to establish his own worth and identity on his own terms. He chooses differently than Adam and Eve, and instead remains dependent on God. Jesus knows *who* he is, that is, by remembering *whose* he is. Let's hear that again (repeat).

Now, part of being human is being aware that we are insufficient, that we are not complete in and of ourselves, that this feeling of incompleteness is a permanent part of our condition. To be human, in other words, is to be aware that we carry inside ourselves a hole, an emptiness, a longing for more, that we will always be restless to fill and seek ways to fill it.

Adam and Eve took the fruit and concluded in a snap judgment that the hole inside them is shaped just like that fruit (the Bible never says it's an apple, but we make that mistake, too). Yet after they eat, the emptiness remains. Today we might imagine that hole to be shaped just like a new car, or computer, or better house, some cool sunglasses or Dr. Dre Beatz or the perfect spouse.

But after laboring and sacrificing and obtaining these things, the emptiness remains. A wise philosopher more than 400 years ago described this essential condition of humanity as having a "God-shaped hole," and this is exactly what Jesus demonstrates. There is no filling of that gap, no permanent erasing that hole, except in and through relationship with God. Or, as St. Augustine said, we humans are always restless until we rest in God.

But once again, it's bigger than that. Even that isn't quite the full picture. To be fully Christian is not to have that hole, that need, that awareness of finitude erased once and for all. No. That's nearly impossible for any of us to do. What we can do, however, is to accept that in being human we are, finally, created for relationship with God and with each other. Maybe the ultimate goal and

purpose of the life of faith isn't to ***escape*** limitation but ***live into the promise of*** limitation in order to discover God amid our needs. If we can do that, then we learn after many years of toiling in the wilderness of our lives, just like Paul, that God's grace is sufficient for us.

Let me leave you with this final Lenten reflection for this week.

Perhaps faith doesn't do away with the hardships that are part and parcel of this life, but rather gives us the courage to stand amid and amongst them. Perhaps faith is our struggle to do more than just simply surviving, in a way that we can take our emptiness and judo-flip it into something that can help build us up and not tear us down. When we can genuinely stop wrestling the universe for control, but acknowledge that God and all of creation around us can be trusted to help build us up in hard but amazing ways, we can find that we will actually be flourishing in and through Jesus. One who was also tempted as we are and knows our struggles first hand. This same Jesus now invites us to find both hope and courage in the God who named not only him, but all of

us, beloved children, so that we, also, might discover **who** we are by recalling **whose** we are.

Thanks be to God, Amen.