

1 Lent, Year A: 13 March 2011

Today's Gospel passage begins with an incredible contrast. Jesus has just been baptized by John in the Jordan. Now we hear that Jesus, *full* of the Holy Spirit, is led into the *emptiness* of the wilderness. He quickly goes from one extreme to another. The Middle Eastern wilderness is a vast and harsh place: rocky, desolate, and dry.

It could be a frightening place for a person alone, who'd really have to do battle physically and emotionally just to survive in that rough environment. Jesus is led into this wilderness very much alone: no human companionship, no food. The evangelist says that Jesus ate nothing at all during those 40 days in the wilderness, and that he was tested in very specific ways by the devil. This is one of those passages in Scripture that almost immediately make us picture a movie scene in our minds. We've all probably seen one of the many Hollywood Bible movies that show us a devil looking very much like a human dragon with horns and a tail, taking Jesus, who really doesn't look the worse for wear after 40 days of no food, on fantastic journeys.

This devil seems to tempt Jesus to be a magician, to turn stones into bread. He lets Jesus see all the kingdoms of the world, and then he takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem and says, "Throw yourself down, your angels will catch you." No one in Jerusalem would have trouble believing in Jesus if they had seen him carried by angels from the top of the temple!

These are very vivid images, but we might be tempted to think, "What a great story and didn't Jesus give very clever answers, but what could this passage really say to me?" We might be tempted to wonder if *we're* ever really *full* of the Holy Spirit, and we might not be able to imagine *ever* being offered a look at all the kingdoms of the world in an instant. So, what does this passage have to offer *us*?

Actually, quite a lot.

The realities of fullness and emptiness, grace and temptation, are very much a part of all our lives. Jesus' wilderness experience wasn't a Hollywood movie scene; it was an intensely personal time of soul-searching, of discernment about vocation and mission.

This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing. Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.

Bear with me for a small textual discursion here.
The Greek word *diabolos*, here translated as “devil,”
is actually a replacement of the Hebrew word *satan*, from which we get Satan.
In its earliest use, this Hebrew word simply meant an adversary,
and it was used this way throughout the Hebrew scriptures:
the angel of the Lord is the *satan* who stands in Balaam’s way;
the Philistines fear that David may turn out to be their *satan*;
Solomon declares that God has given him such peace and prosperity
that he has no *satan* left to oppose him.
You get the picture.

Later on the word took on a slightly darker slant.
In the Hebrew writings that come closest to Jesus’ day, Satan
—now a personification, capital “S”—
serves as a kind of prosecuting attorney;
he attempts to undermine the faithful testimony and confidence of human beings,
and weighs their case as they stand in the presence of the Almighty.
This is the way Satan appears in the Book of Job
and in the writings of the prophet Zechariah.
And please note that while this Satan is portrayed as an adversary of humankind,
he is very much working as an agent of God.

Only very late in the game,
as Hebrew thought took on some of the cosmic dualism of Hellenistic philosophy—
light versus dark, good versus evil, spirit versus matter—
a very false and un-Jewish splitting of one reality into artificial, opposing categories:
only then did Satan become the powerful adversary *of God*,
the darkness that attempts to overcome the light,
the essence of everything that is against God.

It is in this latter context that the early converts to Christianity
would have understood the gospel account of Jesus tested by Satan.
Jesus struggles with his adversary,
a mighty power that is against God
and will try anything to thwart God’s plan for the world,
and Jesus prevails.

Most of us know this struggle, too,
although on a more personal and less cosmic level.
There are satanic forces all around us
that would thwart God’s purpose for our lives,
powers that constantly test our resolve and our faith.
But we know that we can prevail because we have Jesus’ example before us,
and in him is our strength.

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At every baptism the parents and godparents
promise to renounce Satan
and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God,
including all those sinful desires that draw us from the love of God.
This battle is still ours and is very real.
But then we also pray that the newly baptized
may be filled with God's holy and life-giving spirit,
that they might come to the fullness of the peace and glory of God.
This power is also ours and is also very real.
Each of us is filled with the Holy Spirit at our baptism,
and we are full just as Jesus was full.
As each new baptisand is anointed with oil the priest says,
"You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism
and marked as Christ's own for ever."

We are *filled* as Jesus was filled,
and from that place of empowered identity
we make all the promises of our baptismal covenant,
proclaiming that this is how, with God's help, we will live.
But even filled with the Spirit, we can be led into our own wilderness,
struggle with our own internalized adversary.
We need those times in our lives when we come face to face with who we are.
Liturgically that's why we have this season of Lent,
why it begins with the deep self-reflection of Ash Wednesday.
In today's Gospel, the devil—the adversary—presents Jesus with a series of idols;
he tests him, tempting him to replace God's way
with things that represent the world's way.
We are faced with idols in our own lives,
those things that cause us to act in ways that turn us
from fulfilling God's call to us.

Right now your present and future identity as CEC
is being tested by the discovery process and its questions.
As you answer the nine questions or fill out the questionnaire
(which may be done on line, by the way, thanks to Pat Welke),
I hope you will consider what internalized adversary
might be tempting you to envision less than you can be,
that is, filled with the Spirit as God intends you to be.
Remember that the adversary presents options that at first appear attractive,
but which in reality are idols
that might stand in the way of fulfilling our baptismal mission.
I can, as a relatively objective outsider who cares for you, dare to suggest a few:
a desire for continuity and stability that might stifle God's dynamic creativity;
a satisfaction with "the way things are" that might mask a hesitation to look too deeply;
a priority for close-knit community that might prevent truly embracing diversity;
a spoken respect for and deference to "Father"
that might prevent your taking ownership of your own life as a faith community,
and which sometimes disguises a passive-aggressive reality.

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Bear in mind that these are my observations; you do not have to agree with me.
Nevertheless, I think they bear reflecting upon.
So while I appreciate that the discovery process has a timeline,
I hope that you will not rush to answer the discovery questions.
When you get them, read them through but then lay them aside for a week.
Take at least a portion of these Lenten 40 days as Jesus did,
as a time of deep discernment on identity and mission,
a time for prayer and meditation.

When all is said and done,
who will you claim to be and how will you live that out?

It's not always easy.
It's never easy to admit our shortcomings, to face our growing edge..
It's often even harder to repent and begin anew.
But we find the good news in the first verse we read today.
Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit.
The Spirit did not leave him to face the desert alone.
We are also filled with the Holy Spirit.
The Spirit does not leave us when the going gets rough either.
She goes with us into the desert, helps us confront the hard times,
and supports us as we turn again to living the life God calls us to live.

May angels wait on you, Christ Church.
All things are possible for those who believe.

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