

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT (C)

Our scripture passage comes from the Gospel of Luke 4:1–13. In this text we hear of Satan tempting Jesus while our Lord was in the desert for forty days. The temptations are three-fold and have important applications for our lives. Traditionally, these temptations have been understood as overcoming the three desires for Pleasure, Power, and Prestige. While that can be a valid application of the passage, these temptations can also mean much more than that.

One of the first things to note is that Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit and that the Spirit leads Him to the desert (see Lk 4:1). This important detail means that Jesus has gone to the desert as part of His mission which is to conquer the Devil on his own turf. Jesus was already introduced as the mightier one in the preaching of John the Baptist (see Lk 3:16). Even the Magnificat of Mary proclaims that God has scattered the proud with the strength of His arm and cast the mighty from their thrones (see Lk 1:51-52). Now the stronger one goes to claim back the world from the dominion of Satan by overcoming the power of temptation and teaching us how to do so in the process.

Throughout Luke's Gospel we will encounter various scenes which portray the efforts of Satan to retain control of the world. The devil is identified as the one who tries to take away the word of God from people's hearts lest they believe and are saved (see Lk 8:12). Various other passages demonstrate Jesus' ability to conquer Satan and to claim the world for Himself. These passages include Satan falling from heaven like lightening at the preaching of the Gospel (see Lk 10:18), Jesus casting Satan out of possessed individuals (see Lk 11:14-23), and the woman with a hemorrhage whom Jesus released after being bounded by Satan for eighteen years (see Lk 13:16). The reality of Satan's continuing influence and threat to disciples is even manifested at the Last Supper when Jesus successfully prays for Peter's conversion in light of the disciple's inevitable failure (see Lk 22:3, 31).

Jesus' victory over Satan begins in this Gospel passage when our Lord robs the devil of his power one temptation at a time. Our Lord accomplishes this victory by not exercising power the way Satan wants Him to but obediently and faithfully following the Father's plan for humanity instead. Specifically, Jesus refuses to use His power over nature to feed His appetites, to use His power over others for the sake of momentary glory, or to manipulate God's promises for His own survival.

As disciples, we should not be surprised when we continue to experience temptations in our daily lives. The good news is that we don't have to face these moments alone or without hope in Christ who is the stronger one. Lent is a very important time when we are invited to spend these forty days in prayer with Jesus so that we can recognize and reject the presence of evil.

What does it mean to you that Jesus was led by the Spirit to conquer Satan on his own turf?

When do you most need Jesus to be the Stronger One in your life so as to set you free from the oppressive cycle of temptation and sin?

How can you invite Jesus into your life so that our Lord can heal and strengthen what has been wounded by temptation and sin?

The first temptation is for Jesus to turn stones into bread. When you think about it, what would have been the sin if Jesus had done it? This temptation was about more than just food; it was the temptation for Jesus to violate the limits of His humanity and to exercise His power as God. Literally, it was the temptation for Jesus to break the bounds of human limitations and to be “like God.” That was what Adam did when he chose to eat of the Tree of Knowledge so he could be like God (see Gn 3:5). Jesus overcame this temptation by choosing to live with His hunger rather than feed it in a way that violated the divinely appointed limits of humanity.

Satan tempts us to fill our natural hungers in an unholy and even unnatural way as well. This is an important insight because we all experience hungers that are proper to our nature. Some people are hungry for food and water, others for love and respect. Still others are hungry for meaning and purpose. These are good and natural desires that are part of our divinely-intended humanity. Yet our life is much more than these hungers. When we believe that our life is based on feeding such desires then we will try to feed them at all costs and our insatiable desire to have more will dominate our lives and lead us away from God. The result is that we can easily become a slave to our appetites and our lives can seem out of control as we try to feed one desire after another. As children of God, our life comes from the Father and not from satisfying our desires. We must learn to dismiss every lie that tries to enslave us to our hungers. We must also learn that it is better to live with our hungers than to feed them in an ungodly way.

When can we be tempted to want to be like God in setting our own rules for right and wrong?

How can we try to be like God in treating others as less than ourselves?

Do we try to be like God in thinking it's OK to satisfy our every want in any way we can?

This temptation is also the tendency to think that our life comes from something other than God whether it be our work, our riches, our relationships, and so forth. How are we tempted to find our life fulfilled in ways other than what God intends?

The second temptation is for Jesus to be successful at the cost of being faithful. Satan will try to tempt us to play by his rules for the sake of getting ahead rather than respecting God's will and following the Lord's guidance in the midst of a fallen world. How easy it is in our secular world to live by the values of the market rather than the values of the Gospel. We are giving in to this temptation any time when we find ourselves accepting the world as it is and operating by secular norms in the belief that such norms are legitimate guidelines for disciples. We often times use the phrase, “That's how things work” or “that's the way things are” to justify such decisions to capitulate to the world as it is. We need to know that such a decision is to pay homage to the prince of this world who is Satan. We must never agree to play by his rules.

There is another aspect to this temptation. Jesus came as the Messiah and people had

certain expectations for how the Messiah should act and what he would accomplish. While Jesus did fulfill some of the messianic expectations, He did not fulfill all of them. It is tempting to please people by meeting their expectations but sometimes those expectations can go against who we are as disciples. In those moments, we are called to be faithful rather than successful in the eyes of others. Some people in Jesus' time expected the messiah to be a political ruler who would set Judea free from Roman occupation and so gain all the kingdoms of the world. Here, Satan tempts Jesus to accomplish His goal at the cost of losing His soul. That is the temptation to put something else in the center of our life and service rather than keeping it focused on God and the Father's will. It is also the temptation to give in to others' expectations of us and to become the person others expect us to be rather than the person God wants us to be.

This temptation has other manifestations as well. It can lead us to use our lives to serve some other purpose than God. It can also lead us to falsely believe that the end justifies the means. Lastly it can lead us to believe that compromising our principals of faith is acceptable for the sake of momentary gain.

When are you tempted to cut moral or ethical corners for the sake of ever-greater success?

When are you tempted to do what others want even when it means violating your conscience or your faith?

When are you tempted to portray yourself in a false way just to make others happy rather than becoming the person God intended you to be?

Which other aspect of this temptation speaks to your life?

The third temptation is for Jesus to throw Himself off the temple so as to test God's presence and protective promise. It is the temptation to doubt that God is with us in moments of crisis. and Satan issues the temptation by actually quoting scripture! This is a reminder that Satan can distort any good thing to lead us astray. This is an important lesson for us as disciples because we need to rely on the Holy Spirit's guidance to help us discern even the correct application and interpretation of scripture. For this reason Saint Paul teaches us to test everything while holding fast to what is good (see 1 Thes 5:21).

Think of how easy it is to experience a tragedy and to doubt that God was present all along. Think also of how many people lose faith because of a distressful event in their lives. Jesus overcame the temptation to make the Father prove His love and His presence. Our Lord would not put the Father to the test. He remained faithful and trusting in the Father's love even as He died on the cross. Jesus' last words in Luke's Gospel are an act of trust and confidence in the Father's care when He said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" — the very words faithful Jews used to close the day before going to sleep each night (see Lk 23:46). Jesus had no need to test the Father's presence because Jesus did not doubt the Father's presence. He didn't need proof; He had faith.

This can also be the temptation to live life irresponsibly and rely on others to care for the

consequences of our actions (or even to blame others for the consequences of our decisions).

It is also the temptation which leads us to believe we can manipulate God's response based on our actions. Such an attitude reflects a pagan understanding by which prayers and sacrifices were offered in order to manipulate and evoke specific responses from the gods. Any time we believe that our actions force God's response then we are giving into this temptation.

When do you find yourself doubting God's presence in your life?

What are ways in which you can erroneously try to make God prove His presence in your life?

How does it challenge you to know that Satan can even misquote scripture to try and lead us into temptation and sin?

When are you tempted to act recklessly and expect others to care for the consequences of your actions or to even blame others for those consequences?

Jesus overcame these three temptations as He began His ministry and we will have to overcome them as well so we can follow faithfully where He leads us. Each of these temptations surfaced in the Exodus as the Hebrew people wandered for forty years in the desert. They, too, tried to rely on their own ability to sustain and protect their livelihood and gave in to the temptation to hoard manna and to think that God would not care for them. They, too, were tempted to set up idols so they could attempt to control God's presence and action rather than faithfully following to the Lord's will and living by His commands. They were also tempted to believe that God had abandoned them in the midst of their trials and that they were being punished because of the difficulties they faced as they wandered. Jesus overcame the temptations by which the people of Israel failed in their faith. Our Lord has shown us what a disciple's life looks like when we, too, overcome those same perennial temptations.

Which of these temptations most affects you?

What can you do during the Lenten Time to grow stronger and more confident in your trust in God?

This passage encourages us to beware of other ways that Satan will tempt us. At the end of our Lord's temptations in the desert, we are told that Satan departed for an opportune time (see Lk 4:13 where the Greek word *kairos* is used and refers to designated time rather than chronological time). That means Satan will be waiting on the sidelines for any moment of weakness to tempt Jesus, and us, in new ways. The opportune time for Satan to tempt Jesus will occur when our Lord is on the cross and He is tempted to once again prove His messianic identity by saving Himself and avoiding suffering rather than by faithfully and obediently accepting it (see the three-fold temptations that are addressed to Jesus in Lk 23:35-39).

When we are tired, or not paying attention to our prayer life, or distracted, or confused or angry or hurt or vulnerable in any way – Satan is always there to offer a quick, expedient, and

compromising solution to whatever challenges we are facing. Each of us has opportune moments when we are susceptible to temptation. We must learn to recognize our own particular moments of vulnerability and to respond as mature disciple who discern the appropriate application of scripture and use the Word of God as a clear guide that helps us navigate the obscure situations of each day.

How does it disturb you to know that Satan knows your weaknesses and vulnerabilities better than you do?

What are some of the opportune situations when you are most susceptible to temptation? What can you do to invite Jesus into these moments specifically and seek His strength and protection?

Lastly, one final comment can be made regarding the different sequence of the temptations as recorded in Luke and Matthew. Luke records the temptation on the parapet of the Temple in Jerusalem as the final of the three whereas Matthew records the temptation on the high mountain as the last one. While this differing order may seem insignificant, it actually communicates a subtle and important message for us as disciples. Basically, Luke records the temptation on the Temple of Jerusalem last because the destination of Jesus' journey in Luke's Gospel is Jerusalem. Jesus' destination in Matthew's Gospel is that of a mountain (see Mt 28:28). Thus, the series of temptations in each Gospel are programmatic of Jesus' mission.

This intentional ordering is part of Luke's effort to present the Gospel message in such a way that his audience (Theophilus) can know the truth of which they have been informed. Jesus' life and ministry unfolds according to the Father's perfect and holy will. Even our Lord's rejection, persecution, and crucifixion are part of that perfect divine will.

We need to know that our lives unfold according to God's perfect and holy will. That's not always visible in daily circumstances and difficult challenges. Sometimes it's helpful for us to understand our experiences through the lens of Jesus' ministry so we can know the truth of which we have been informed as well. Jesus is the Truth of God and when we see our lives reflected in the experience of Jesus then we can make sense of it all. In order for this to happen, someone needs to present the Gospel to us in an "orderly" way so that we can recognize the hand of God active and present in our daily circumstances. In the same way, we are called to present the Gospel to others in such an orderly way. The knowledge that we are not alone and that our lives are unfolding as part of God's loving plan allows us to trust the Lord and entrust ourselves to Him now and forever.

Who has presented the Gospel to you in such an orderly way that you could see your life resonating in the experiences of Jesus?

Who needs the Gospel presented to them in such an orderly way and how can you do that?