

Welcome to this first episode of what we have called *Holy Nemesis*. It is inspired, in part, by the story of Jacob wrestling with God at the Jabbok in Genesis 32. We hope that these weekly reflections on the texts (or the Gospel text in particular) for the upcoming Sunday will give you some food for thought and aid you in continuing the wrestling that is very much a part of faith. I am Mark Lingle, the rector at St. Francis Episcopal Church in Stamford, CT. My colleagues from the Stamford community who will also be offering reflections include:

The Rev. David Van Dyke, senior pastor at First Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Shelley Donaldson, associate pastor at First Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Duane Pederson, pastor at St. John's Lutheran Church

Brandon Pierce, pastor at Stamford Church of Christ

Rabbi Joshua Hammerman, Rabbi at Temple Beth-El

The Rev. Sandy Key, assistant priest at St. John's Episcopal

Blessings.

Sunday, March 10, 2019--Lent 1C

The texts assigned for this Sunday in the Revised Common Lectionary include:

1. Deuteronomy 26:1-11, where we hear the classic phrase that people are commanded to offer when they bring a sacrifice to the priest: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. . . So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me." You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. What is, perhaps, most notable about this text is the very end of the selection where the people are entreated to not only celebrate with their own but also, "the aliens who reside among you." As the text reads: "Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house. How do we celebrate today with the alien in our midst?"

2. Romans 10:8b-13 where Paul declares to the community in Rome, "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" and, "For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved." and a little further, "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him." While Paul clearly believes that Jesus is the way of salvation, perhaps, this vision of there being no distinction between traditions--Jew and Greek in this case--is a way for us to enter into inter-religious dialogue in our own day. The purpose may not be so much to convert as it is to understand how the word is near to our brothers and sisters of other traditions and the unitive reality of the divine that transcends the divisions we create.

3. The gospel text for Sunday, March 10 comes from Luke 4:1-13. It reads:

After his baptism, Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

This text is perfect for the first Sunday in Lent as we hear about Jesus' own trials or tempting. The forty days that Jesus spends in the wilderness aligns with the 40 days of the flood and Noah's emergence from that cataclysm. The number 40 also aligns with the 40 years of the people of Israel wandering in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land. For us, the forty days of Lent are based on Jesus' experience in the wilderness. The fasting or giving up of items that we might engage in during this season is connected to Jesus' own fasting. And the humanity of Jesus is expressed in the physical environment in which he finds himself as well as the struggle he endures. It is nice to know that as we journey in Lent and in life, we do not journey alone. There is one who knows this journey.

Regarding some of the specific elements of the gospel, Luke shares this story with Matthew. However the last two temptations are reversed. The temptation of Jesus by the devil is the clear focus. The Greek, *diabolos* almost always translates the Hebrew "*SaTan*" in the LXX. "*SaTan*" means "adversary," which in the Hebrew scriptures are primarily other people, not supernatural beings. Along with this, the temptation or testing that is a part of the story does not mean coercion. The tempter does not have the power to make someone do the wrong thing. Indeed the following story from *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore: Stories, Traditions, Legends, Humor*,

*Wisdom and Folk Songs of the Jewish People*, (Edited by Nathan Ausubel Copyright, 1948, Crown Publishers, Inc., New York) expresses this well.

The Evil Spirit once came dejected before God and wailed, "Almighty God -- I want you to know that I am bored -- bored to tears! I go around doing nothing all day long. There isn't a stitch of work for me to do!"

"I can't understand you," replied God. There's plenty of work to be done only you've got to have more initiative. Why don't you try to lead people into sin? That's your job!"

"Lead people into sin!" muttered the Evil Spirit contemptuously. "Why Lord, even before I can get a chance to say a blessed word to anyone he has already gone and sinned!"

Thus, the old adage that, "The devil made me do it," is often a misnomer. There is no outside force controlling us. There exists our human desires, longings, and pride that often lure us to do what we full well know is the thing that we should not do. Consequently, we should be able to identify with the apostle Paul when he says in Romans 7.19, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."

To continue, a quick look at the three tests or temptations. The first temptation feeds on Jesus' hunger. He has been fasting and the opportunity that he might create food for himself is presented. At first glance, what could be wrong with this? Not only could Jesus feed himself, but he could feed others (and he will shortly do so in the feeding of the 5000). Jesus' contention that, "One does not live by bread alone," is his acceding to a higher power. For Christians, this response is the reverse of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. Adam and Eve get in trouble by trying to be God, to aspire to more, to be who they are not. Meanwhile, Jesus rejects such a move, and humbly maintains the limit that is set. As the writer of Philippians 2 so eloquently put it:

Let the same mind be in you that was [\[a\]](#) in Christ Jesus,

6 who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

7 but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

8 he humbled himself

The second temptation gives us the adage, "sell your soul to the devil," long before Faust. The devil's enticement is for power, but, ultimately, to remain subservient. As Jesus did with the first temptation, he quotes scripture to deflect the second, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." The word for "worship" (*proskyneō*) also has the sense of "to bow down or fall down before". It refers both to body position and/or an attitude and activity of reverence or honor. Only God deserves this honor. It raises the question of all of the various things in life that entice us away from God, even those things which we think are potentially good. As Paul Tillich noted,

one way of thinking about God is *that which is of utmost concern*. What are our concerns? What things may supercede the Holy? Awareness and discernment are important. Again, the season of Lent is helpful to us in this regard.

Finally, the third temptation. The devil uses Jesus' defense mechanism against him. The devil can also quote scripture. And does so. "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,'" One of the issues here is the discernment of the Word of God. How do we use it? How can it be manipulated to our end? And how does one remain faithful amidst the various voices vying for our attention? Note also that this temptation doesn't take place in the wilderness, but at the temple. It goes without saying that there is no place that temptation is not, and, perhaps, our churches and synagogues are places most ripe for abuse because of the perception that such things do not exist there. Faith, from this perspective, is never static, solved. Faith is dynamic and active, responsive to the world.

Jesus' response to the devil from Dt 6:16 provides further understanding about this test. The entire verse reads: "Do not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah." In order to discover how they tested God at Massah (the Hebrew word for "test"), we need to look at Ex 17:7: "He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, 'Is the LORD among us or not?'" Part of what is going on in this encounter is figuring out where God is, or, perhaps, how do we trust that God is here? Who hasn't wanted to know beyond the shadow of a doubt of God existing and what "sign" could be given for this. Certainly, the third temptation pushes Jesus to the brink. It also allows us a chance to step away from pressing for a "sign" from the divine so that we might believe and enter into an ongoing discernment as to how that presence manifests itself throughout our life.

Finally, two references:

Culpepper (*Luke*, New Interpreter's Bible) offers this reflection at the end of his comments on the text:

For modern readers, the problem with the temptation story is that it seems unreal, far removed from our experience. The devil does not appear to us and transport us from place to place. The temptations we experience are often not so clearly recognizable. The choice is not between good and bad but between bad and worse or good and better. We deal in "gray areas." and do not have the choice of rejecting "Mr. In-between." ... When does what is good for the corporate body outweigh the need of an individual? Which has the higher claim, the needs of the unemployed for a job or anti-pollution standards that protect the ecology but close down certain industries?

Should the medical community allow fetal research or the use of fetal tissue to save one life at the expense of another? Where are the guiding words of Scripture for questions like these?

Although the temptation story does not offer ethical instructions that cover every eventuality, it does describe the perennial ethical challenges that Christians face: the temptations to forget one's baptismal identity, to attempt to use one's religion for personal gain, to try to be successful rather than faithful, to be dazzled by the riches of the world, to make compromises where one is called to stand firm, and to avoid the path of sacrifice and suffering. [p. 101]

Frederick Buechner in *The Hungering Dark*, has a chapter called "The Calling of Voices." The thoughts in this chapter are based, in part, on Matthew 4:4 -- "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

In John Marquand's novel "Point of No Return," for instance, after years of apple-polishing and bucking for promotion and dedicating all his energies to a single goal, Charlie Gray finally gets to be vice-president of the fancy little New York bank where he works; and then the terrible moment comes when he realizes that it is really not what he wanted after all, when the prize that he has spent his life trying to win suddenly turns to ashes in his hands. His promotion assures him and his family of all the security and standing that he has always sought, but Marquand leaves you with the feeling that maybe the best way Charlie Gray could have supported his family would have been by giving his life to the kind of work where he could have expressed himself and fulfilled himself in such a way as to become in himself, as a person, the kind of support they really needed.

There is also the moment in the Gospels where Jesus is portrayed as going into the wilderness for forty days and nights and being tempted there by the devil. And one of the ways that the devil tempts him is to wait until Jesus is very hungry from fasting and then to suggest that he simply turn the stones into bread and eat. Jesus answers, "Man shall not live by bread alone," and this just happens to be, among other things, true, and very close to the same truth that Charlie Gray comes to when he realizes too late that he was not made to live on status and salary alone but that something crucially important was missing from his life even though he was not sure what it was any more than, perhaps, Marquand himself was sure what it was.

There is nothing moralistic or sentimental about this truth. It means for us simply that we must be careful with our lives, for Christ's sake, because it would seem that they are the only lives we are going to have in this puzzling and perilous world, and so they are very precious and what we do with them matters enormously. Everybody knows that. We need no one to tell it to us. Yet in another way perhaps we do always need to be told, because there is always the temptation to believe that we have all the time in the world, whereas the truth of it is that we do not. We have only a life, and the choice of how we are going to live it must be our own choice, not one that we let the world make for us. ... [pp. 30-31]

