

I want to try something different this week. Every Thursday a group of us gather to take a look at the upcoming gospel for Sunday, and today I'm inviting you to pull up a chair and listen in to our conversation.

We begin by setting the context of the gospel both in terms of Jesus' ministry and also our church year. Whether it is from Matthew, Mark, or Luke, the gospel for the first Sunday in Lent is always the account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. It immediately follows his baptism, so the two are somehow related, and stands at the beginning of his ministry. Each year we hear of three temptations, one cosmic, one earthly, and one of self.

At this point we opened our prayer books to baptism on page 302, (you can too) and looked at the three renunciations we make – and discovered they are the mirror image of Jesus' temptations. Jesus, fully human, yet divine, did not succumb. We do, so we began a deeper exploration of those temptations and the ways in which we fall into their trap.

Satan, knowing Jesus is hungry, suggests he should turn the stones around him into bread, in essence, to play God. This mirrors, in some ways, the sin of Adam and Eve when they are tempted to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil (knowledge that belongs to God alone.) We renounce all sinful desires, our own attempts at "playing God," in baptism which separate us from the love of God, because God alone is God.

We talked about how the tongue is the most powerful muscle in the body, and how we often use it to judge the neighbors we are meant to love. We were reminded that Pope Leo has called on Christians "to a very practical and frequently unappreciated form of abstinence: that of refraining from words that offend and hurt our neighbor. Let us begin by disarming our language, avoiding harsh words and rash judgement, refraining from slander and speaking ill of those who are not present and cannot defend themselves. Instead, let us strive to measure our words and cultivate kindness and respect in our families, among our friends, at work, on social media, in political debates, in the media and in Christian communities. In this way, words of hatred will give way to words of hope and peace."

Next, Satan, knowing the allure of power, places Jesus at the pinnacle of the temple in the holy city tempting him to throw himself down, testing God's will to save him from harm. The group talked about the kinds of power each of us have, that no one is without some kind of power. We talked about the temptation of the lottery, how in the beginning our intentions for our winnings would be for good, but how that could swiftly turn to compromising a little at a time. In baptism, we renounce "the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God," and which tempt us to fall in line with them.

Finally, the devil takes Jesus to a very high mountain from which he can see all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor and promises all of it to Jesus if only he will fall down and worship him. But God is the God of all creation, and only God is worthy of worship, so Jesus says a resounding "no." Yet, often, when tempted, we say yes. We worship so much that has nothing to do with God. We put so much that is not God at the center of our lives, to the exclusion of God. And sometimes, we even put our own Christian way of worship ahead of God.

My Facebook feed is mostly filled with ads for things my phone has heard me say I might want to buy. But once in a while there is something worth stopping to read. I follow Interfaith Alliance, and this week Keith Ellison shared, “In 2026 Ramadan begins as Mardi Gras (Shrove Tuesday) turns to Ash Wednesday and Lent, Lunar New Year also ushers in a new season of hope and renewal. Different traditions. Same call: reflect, fast, celebrate, renew, care for one another. At a time of fear and division, this season reminds us that joy, sacrifice, and compassion can meet at the same crossroads.”

What a stark reminder that in the cosmos we are one when as in baptism “we renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God.” We are one, all created in the image of God, no matter how different we look, sound, or seem, we are one. We forget this at our and the world’s peril.

Having explored the temptations in the wilderness over and against the renunciations we make in baptism, our discussion shifted to how to stay the course in Lent, to be intentional in all we do to keep the season. How to let it be a time of transformation and renewal.

For the teachers in the group, we could see Lent as a big lesson plan. Our goal was to draw closer to God, to strengthen our relationship with God and with our neighbors as the living image of this sacred relationship.

To work toward this goal, the group suggested daily readings, from a wide variety of sources including Forward Day by Day which is available in the back of the church, or the Province 1 Lenten Devotional which is available online and linked in our e-news which I am confident, now, you all read. Setting aside a specific time each day to pray, read, and reflect was also suggested. And don’t chastise ourselves if and when we fell short. Lent is a season of growth not a time to beat ourselves up. We’re human so imperfect. That is just reality.

As we were ending our time together, we were reminded that while the 40 days of Lent can seem like a long time, it is not forever. But the transformation, when we show up, do our work, and then get out of God’s way can last a lifetime.