

## **Weak riders, strong mules**

*RCL Year A, Lent I*

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

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+In the Name of the Ever-Blessed Trinity, One God. Amen.

For quite some time now, I've been a fan of quirky online quizzes that tell you something about yourself. You might know the quizzes I mean....

*Which Harry Potter Hogwarts House Do You Belong In?* Well, apparently, in my case, it's Huffelpuff.

*Which Mid-Twentieth Century Anglican Theologian Are You?* – yes this exists! My result was Donald MacKinnon, Scottish theologian and philosopher at the Universities of Aberdeen and Cambridge. All the more reason to start wearing my kilt to church!

Now as we move through Lent, my mind has been on another such test – one for which I would never, ever post the results on Facebook. *Which of the Seven Deadly Sins are You?* Believe it or not, there are a number of these deadly sin quizzes out there, some more detailed and better than others. I've taken several of them, repeatedly, and, trust me, it's never good news.

The Deadly Sins....if you happened to be a movie-goer in the 1990s, you might recall Morgan Freeman's distinguished voice, saying in the aptly named crime drama, *Seven*, that "*There are seven deadly sins.*" Whether from film or Sunday School, you might even recall what these seven are: Pride, Envy, Wrath, Gluttony, Lust, Sloth, and Greed.

The earliest version of this list was penned by the Fourth Century theologian and monk, Evagrius Ponticus.

Evagrius spent his later life in monastic communities in Egypt, writing and teaching. He dedicated much thought to the matter of sin and, in the year 375 CE, formalized a list of evil thoughts – temptations – that could lead all too easily to sinful action. With not much going on out there in the Egyptian desert, he was likely quite right.

Two centuries later, Pope Gregory the Great further refined the list, combining a couple of Evagrius's patterns of evil thought and adding Envy to yield the now-familiar list of Seven Deadly Sins. Since at least the Sixth Century, this list has served as a go-to guide on the dangers of temptation and the worst, most all-consuming sins to which certain temptations can lead. And this, of course – temptation – is a core theme on this First Sunday of Lent, which we began by praying that God *“come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations.”*

Now at this point, it is worth acknowledging that all of this talk of temptation and sin can sound very old school and even perhaps even unhelpful to modern ears. Worse still is the notion of malevolent forces or beings – devils and demons – seductively enticing weak-willed human beings to wander and err, to lead us into sin, “to make us do it.” Apart from being a downright scary idea, the very notion of demonic whisperings can also sound far-fetched. An age-old excuse of some, perhaps, for terrible things they have chosen to do; or a means of social control and the enforcement of convention; or even a reason to feel bad about oneself. This is not an unreasonable concern or perspective by any means.

Nonetheless, Christian theology and tradition is and always has been very much focused on sin and redemption, on right and wrong, on temptation and grace. So how might we reconcile our modern sensibilities and knowledge with the theological understanding that we are often tempted? That, as one modern writer dramatically describes things, *“Satan and the rest of the fallen angels are filled with the bitterest hatred...against every human...and aim to rob us of our appointed glory and plunge us into the abyss of Hell.”*

Lent can really turn up the heat, can't it? We're not in Epiphanytide anymore...

I was actually a bit surprised to find that modern Psychology has to some extent adopted and reframed the notion of temptation, while still using the same word. The magazine *Psychology Today* has run no fewer than 18 articles on the matter of temptation over the past decade or so. One article from an academic psychology journal even fully adopted the Seven Deadly Sins to create a catalogue of the most commonly experienced human impulses. The writers then went on to define temptation itself as any desire that could make us abandon personal goals (like eyeing that chocolate cake while dieting), and sin as an abandonment of commonly accepted norms – think: murdering or stealing – that could alienate us from others for obvious reasons.

A recurring image used is one of someone riding a highly impulsive mule, where the rider is seeking to exert control and the mule represents the buck and pull of impulses and temptation away from goal achievement. Here, the whole problem is basically boiled down to self-control vs. wild impulses...or, put another way, weak riders and strong mules. Not a bad image to have in mind.

Yet, today's Gospel tells us there is more to it than missed personal goals. Matthew – or, Jesus through Matthew – tells us that resisting temptation is much more about who we are at our core and what our larger purpose and indeed our calling is, both as individuals and as communities of faith.

Consider again what the Tempter offers Jesus: For starters, food after 40 days of fasting and presumably only drinking water...*if only Jesus will prove he is God's Son by turning stones to bread.* Satan offers Jesus a sense of certainty, *if only Jesus will test God's faithful protection.* Finally, Satan offers Jesus ultimate power...*if only Jesus will choose earthly authority and thus trust and bow before Satan, the one perpetually out to prove to God the unworthiness of humans.*

In other words, the temptations with which Jesus is confronted are all very personally and immediately related to him, his life, and sense of purpose: The idea of being able to provide for, *to feed* himself and others – by taking a shortcut. The ability to prove to others who Jesus is as God's Son and to enjoy the protection said to go along with that – again by taking a shortcut. And finally, the temptation of banishing foes by violence and becoming the

mightiest of earthly rulers, the Messiah as understood by many – a climactic offer of final triumph over Israel's Roman occupiers and ultimate power to shape people's lives ostensibly for the better. Jesus is offered an easy path to supposed greatness. *If and only if Jesus will bow to the needs, wants and expectations of the world.*

And Jesus' answer? In effect, he says, "This is not who I am. This is not who I want to be. This is not who God calls me to be." Three times quoting Deuteronomy, Jesus affirms that there are no shortcuts in God's plan for salvation – for him or for us. Jesus underscores that what we want, what tempts us might not be what's best for us or others. Jesus tells Matthew's community – and us – that we must always think very carefully about our purpose in life and our relationship with God and neighbor.

"This is not who I am. This is not who I want to be. This is not who God calls me to be."

Think for a moment of something you find a great temptation. Something you know has power over you that you don't want it to have, power to make you wander far into what the Prayer Book rite of confession calls a "land that is waste", whatever that might mean to you. Think of an utterly enticing, irresistible temptation you face, the one that could define you, if it got the upper hand over you. Don't be ashamed or afraid; be honest with yourself.

Let's assume, of course, that this temptation you have in mind is something over which you have meaningful control as a person of free will, a short-term impulse that leads to an action. In that moment of temptation, what might happen if you thought to yourself, "Is this who I am? Is this who I want to be? Is this who God calls me to be?"

Temptation is not yet sin, though sin lurks in very close proximity. We are all tempted, and we pray every Sunday and hopefully regularly at home that God will "lead us not into temptation". Some – perhaps many of us – are well aware that we stand on a perilous ledge in times of temptation, whichever form our shortcomings and undue pleasures take. We know that, under certain circumstances, we might willingly surrender control over our minds and bodies and set out into that land that is waste.

*Just this once... What harm is there...? No one will ever know...*

It is precisely when we do not have this peril in mind that we are at the greatest risk of becoming strangers to ourselves, to others, and to God. It is when we no longer know who we are and who we want to be that we also lose sight of who God calls us to be.

And it is in Lent that we work to remember.

Amen.