

Sermon for First Sunday in Lent
March 6, 2022
Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
Los Alamos, New Mexico
The Rev. Canon Raymond Raney

Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16
Romans 10:8b-13
Luke 4:1-13

Welcome to our First Sunday in the Wilderness.

Today we walk along with Jesus as he is “led by the Spirit for forty days in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.”

The pull on Jesus must have been considerable. In this Gospel according to Luke, the devil spends 40 days tempting Jesus. Imagine living for 40 days and nights resisting temptation – like living in a swarm of flies.

And at the end of those 40 days comes the last three tests.
He has been without food or drink for 40 days.

We see Jesus here with a full awareness of his incarnation and his full humanity. He is human. He is starving.

Famished, dehydrated, tired beyond exhaustion, and to hear a sweet voice invite you to feed yourself.

If we are to understand the temptation that Jesus faced, we must begin to look at the Satanic figure differently

The Devil: Satan, Beelzebub, Scratch, Lucifer, Mephistopheles – all names for the entity we’d all just as soon avoid.

Most of us think of Satan being the tempter of Eve in the Garden of Eden, but that depiction is inferred from the Book of Revelation and amplified in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. In Genesis, Eve is tempted by the serpent.

In early Hebrew tradition the “devil” appears in the books of Job and Zechariah as “Ha-Satan” – the Satan, who is the tester, the adversary, the prosecutor, the tempter. Here he is a member of God’s heavenly court.

Later, during and after the exile in Babylon, Satan assumes the cloak of evil and takes on the character we encounter in *Paradise Lost*, he becomes Lucifer, who opposes God the Father, and would rather “reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.” And it gets better.

Under the influence of Greek philosophy, where good must be beautiful, and evil must be ugly, we see the turn of the demonic to what we consider what evil looks like.

Typically we think of the Devil described as red flesh, horns with a long forked tail – the epitome of evil – depraved ugliness.

Having grown up with this depiction, I was taken aback years ago when I read *The War Hound and the World's Pain* by Michael Moorcock.

It's the story of a bedraggled soldier during the Thirty Years War in the early 1600s. The mercenary, Ulrich von Bek, is enlisted by the Lord of Hell for a quest to find the Holy Grail. Lucifer has tired of Hell and hopes to earn forgiveness from God by healing the pain of the world so the Fallen Angel can return to Heaven.

Von Bek describes Lucifer at their first meeting:

"He was naked and His skin glowed as if with soft, quivering flames. His curling hair was silver and His eyes were molten copper. His body was huge and perfectly formed, and when his lips smiled on me I felt that I had never loved before; I loved Him. He bore an aura about His person which I had never associated with the Devil: perhaps it was a kind of dignified humility combined with a sense of almost limitless power. He spoke in a sweet, mature voice..."

Such a sweet voice to ask us to consider, what? To feed our hunger, to feed our ego, to be cared for by angels Oh, temptation – to be seduced to surrender to one's own desires.

I remember the first time many years ago, when I tried to give up cigarettes. If I could go the day without smoking, I'd reward myself with a cigarette. Makes all the sense in the world – to an addict. But we must remember – denial and discipline are not the same thing.

Denial restricts; Discipline allows. As I wrote in the Tidings last month, I suggest you find something that will give you JOY this Lent. Instead of looking for another deprivation in a time when one deprivation has followed another, stop and look for just one thing to bring light into your life.

It seems to be that for many of us, our observances of Lent have become like what the secular world does at New Years: with resolutions to do better. “I’ll give up coffee, I’ll give up chocolate, I’ll give up TV.” Then in a few days, a few weeks, the questions begin: have you broken your resolve yet? Have you given in to temptation?

We make all kinds of promises when we are in want, when we are in need. Look at the Hebrews on the verge of the Promised Land, and Moses reminds them of what they are to give – what they are to remember.

This reading is the beginnings of what would become the tithe in Jewish tradition: Giving of the first fruits. And the giving is not just the first fruits of the harvest, but also the first born of the sheep and the goats, and children.

That message was something of which my mother periodically reminded me.

As I’ve told you in the past, when I was seven, my cousin and I both contracted Polio. It was the summer the Salk Polio Vaccine was announced: too late for us. My cousin died in three days. I recovered with few discernible effects.

Some years later, my mother told me that she had bargained with God after her sister’s son died. “Spare Raymond,” she prayed, “and I will devote my life and his to your work.”

My mother believed and stood fast in her faith. When I visited her in July 2006, she could only talk about wanting Jesus to call her home. Here I was, a newly minted Deacon, and I anointed her and gave her permission to “go home.”

It had been her wish to return to the beach house on the Florida Gulf Coast to the place my brother and sister and I had sent my parents for their 50th Wedding Anniversary. She had missed the annual trip in May due to illness.

In October she found the strength to go. They arrived at 4:30 in the afternoon. She went shopping at the thrift store she loved, bought a nice blouse. They had

a nice dinner, came back to the cottage on the Gulf, and walked on the beach. Mom and Dad watched the sunset, said their prayers and went to bed. She died in her sleep.

We buried her in the blouse she bought in the cemetery of the church founded by her great-great-great-grandparents beside the graves of her mother and father. God gave her what she yearned for the most.

We all share four strong yearnings::

- We each yearn to belong.
- We yearn to be loved and to love.
- We yearn to make a difference, to contribute.
- We yearn to continue, to endure, to last even beyond death.

“As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives,” We say in the burial anthems.

“and that at the last he will stand upon the earth.
After my awaking, he will raise me up;
and in my body I shall see God.
I myself shall see, and my eyes behold him
who is my friend and not a stranger.”

It’s the same assuredness that Paul proclaims in today’s reading from Romans:

“No one who believes in him will be put to shame...for Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

Amen.