

**Lent 1A. Matthew 4:1-11; Genesis 2:14-17, 3:1-7;
Romans 5:12-19. March 1, 2020.**

If we want a nice bow to tie together these two great, almost fairy tale stories of temptation, St. Paul is here with bow in hand. Paul is actually talking about the cross, rather than this proto-Lent at the start of Jesus' ministry, but the symmetry is irresistible. All of humanity is implicated in the failure of our first parents. And all of humanity is implicated in the redemption accomplished by Jesus Christ. Adam and Eve failed their test; Jesus did not. Jesus in his life, death, and resurrection recapitulates the history of humanity, and especially Israel, but he gets it right and thereby redeems our history and creates for us a new future.

Arguing with Paul from the pulpit is a losing game, so I'm sure all this is meet and right. But I'm not sure that it's exhaustive. In fact, I think these stories are inexhaustible, like Holy Week and Hamlet. There's always more to hear, to explore, to learn. These stories are never done changing us. Which is not to say that all readings of them are equal. I would take Paul's reading over the reading I grew up with any day. Down there in the rural valleys of lower Appalachia, this gospel story was a case study in a conflict we all thought we might face quite literally. We all thought it at least pretty likely that we might one day meet a well-dressed man at a crossroads and be offered a deal.

And so sure enough I met a guy in college who played trombone. This guy had one story, but that story played well in the Flannery O'Connor south of my youth. One night when he was in high school, Lucas was fast asleep when a man in a suit walked into his bedroom. The man said, "Do you know who I am?" And Lucas, keeping a pretty cool head, said yes. And then the devil, because of course that's who it was, sat down and said, "I want you to stop playing the trombone. If you stop, I will reward you." And Lucas in that moment remembered this gospel story of Jesus' victory in the wilderness and found himself filled with the holy fire of the righteous trombone player and said firmly, "No." The next thing he remembered was waking up in the morning.

Now okay. Maybe the devil wanted Lucas to stop being in high school marching band for Jesus. Personally I think it's at least as likely that band-sick parents hired someone to try to bribe or scare their kid into a quieter hobby. But my point is that even though this gospel story has a fairy tale air about it, we don't have to find ourselves living in a fairy tale for it to be relevant to us. My suggestion is that we read it today in the context of the liturgical year, of our life here at the beginning of Lent.

The first few days of Lent are about getting really honest with ourselves. On Ash Wednesday, we tell ourselves--and try to let God tell us--some of the most unpalatable truths of human life. In our culture of constant consumerist desire and gratification, it feels morbid to claim that we have needs that are not easily met. We are more trained to have shallow needs that are created and instantly met by a device or service. But Ash Wednesday garishly insists that we are not sufficient to ourselves, in ways that cannot be fixed with a purchase. We smear ashes on our forehead to force ourselves to see and feel that we can neither make ourselves the people we

want to be, nor make ourselves last as long as we would like to last. It's rather dramatic, because it has to be to get through to us. The most important things are both beyond us in ourselves and promised to us as free gifts. And the better we understand our need, the more likely we are to accept the gift. Ash Wednesday asserts that what we need most is the love of God.

Today's readings don't quite hammer away at our mortality and depravity in the same way Ash Wednesday did. Within the same ballpark, the focus shifts to how eager we are to take shortcuts out of this deep need for the grace and love of God.

Immediately after his baptism and before he begins his public ministry, Jesus goes out into the wilderness to beat up the devil. Each so-called temptation essentially asks Jesus to do a good thing in the wrong order. He will miraculously provide bread to thousands. But he will do it in response to their need, not to his. He will frequently be put into danger, as his hometown tries to throw him off a cliff and the religious authorities regularly plot to kill him. But he gets into these situations that require him to trust God with his very life through the normal course of his ministry. He reveals his trust in God through his work, not through choreographed displays of his status as favorite. And finally, he is ruler of all, but he rules from the cross and there's no quick way to get there.

We are prone to thinking of temptations in terms of appetite: food, sex, leisure, and luxury. The tempter presents Jesus with illicit shortcuts to the things that matter and are elements of his calling. We may or may not face these exact elements of temptation. But if the beginning of Lent is about getting honest about ourselves, then we too are constantly faced with shortcuts to the things that matter, with shortcuts that promise to free us from our dependence on God. If we, individually or collectively, can just get ahold of these weapons, or hoard this much wealth, or incapacitate that rival, then we will know that we are secure. We may even become convinced that enough wealth and power is proof of God's favor. We look for shortcuts to fix our marriages, our careers, our families--maybe even our virtue and happiness.

This story from Matthew is about Jesus refusing the shortcuts and choosing the long right road through all those villages in Galilee and eventually down to Jerusalem and the cross. The things that matter--virtue, right relationship with God and other people, marriage and family life, meaningful work--cannot be grasped by shortcuts. They can't be snatched through a deal. They can only be reached by the long right road that requires a naked, unabashed dependence on God. The good news, the gospel, is that if we take that road Jesus takes it with us and even for us. Amen.