

## First Sunday of Lent

Purgation of Desire

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As we begin Lent, as we start to put our Lenten resolutions into practice, and begin already perhaps to feel their pinch, it is good for us to remember how even here Jesus walks ahead of us to show us the way. For while Jesus may never have actually fallen into sin, we know that he nevertheless did have to struggle against the temptation to sin.

One of the more intriguing features of today's story of Jesus wrestling with the devil is when it occurs. Right after his baptism, right after what must have been the high point of his life up to then, it is then that he is attacked by temptations right and left. As you will recall at his baptism, the heavens opened and the Father spoke directly to him--- "You are my beloved son. On you my favor rests." It is then, full of the Holy Spirit, that that very Spirit drives him into the wilderness, and straight into the hands of Satan.

Why? What does this mean? Let us begin by looking at the particular temptations Jesus has to face.

First, hungry after a forty day fast, probably living on John the Baptist's diet of locust and wild honey, Satan suggests to him, "Hungry? You can work miracles now. How about turning one of these stones into a steaming loaf of fresh hot bread?" Why not? But Jesus refuses.

Then Satan takes him up upon a height, he gestures to the world below and offers to give Jesus an even better deal than the one given him by the Father-- "I will give you power over all the kingdoms of the world." As king of the whole world what could he not do for the poor and the powerless? He could command the creation of a just society on the spot. But again Jesus refuses.

Finally Satan takes him up to the roof of the temple in Jerusalem. "How about jumping off and having God's angels come to your rescue? Now wouldn't that get people's attention? A stunt like that would wow everyone. Who wouldn't follow you after that?" But Jesus refuses a third time, and Satan slinks away defeated.

Possessions, power, prestige--what is common to all these temptations? What is Satan really trying to trick Jesus into doing? Having received the heady revelation that he is the Messiah, in whom the Father is well pleased, Satan tempts Jesus to see this revelation as all about him. If you are God's chosen one, Satan suggests, you could get what ever you want, you could have the whole world at your feet, you could dazzle everyone.

But Jesus refuses. Being the messiah is not going to be about proving to people how important he is but teaching them how important they are; his ministry is not going to be an ego trip but on the contrary, a surrendering of his own ego to the will of his Father. For others to see God when they see him, Jesus must die to what one mystic calls the "I, Me, Mine." And so the devil slinks away, to wait for another opportunity to tempt him again, at his passion. Only we already know that on this second confrontation, Jesus will not simply bat Satan away, he will conquer him once and for all, and for us all.

Many think that the point of penance and asceticism is to resist our desires. But the goal of any penitential practice is less to resist our desires than to release them, to release them from the anxious cravings of our own ego. Sin is not so much a matter of doing whatever we want, but of succumbing to whatever we think we want, usually, what we want only because everyone else wants it too.

The point of purifying our desires is to find out which of our desires are truly our desires, not McDonald's or Hollywood's or the internet's. The point is to discipline our desires that we act not out of what we crave or fear or outrage, but that we might act from out of what we love—that we might become who we truly want to be, who God calls us to be, that we might become our true self.

Advertisers tempt us by getting us to think about ourselves. They present to us a world where everyone is popular, happy, loving and successful; a world they want us to associate with their product. It's not the real world. It's a hyperreal world--better than the real world. It's like the rain that is used in movies, which looks more like rain is supposed to look than "God's rain". Or the old Clairol hair coloring commercial—does she or doesn't she. Someone wrote the company once to ask, "how about those models you show on screen--do they or don't they? The company responded that of course they did, their hair would not look as good without Clairol's haircoloring. – its haircoloring is better than the real thing. Advertisers present us a world that meets our every expectation, caters to our every desire. It's like Disneyworld. A great place to visit—but who would want to live there, 24/7?

Reality is not about what we want, but what we love, truly love, and whom we love, who makes our world come alive. And it is only by acting on behalf of what we love, by acting on behalf of whom we love, that we can come to love ourselves too, love our true selves, not some fantasy image of ourselves and learn not simply what we want at the moment, but what it is that we have really been longing for all along. And in so turning our lives around, from self-pre-occupation to love of God and neighbor, our very world changes with us, from a wilderness of addiction, fear and shame into the wonder and freedom of God's own world, the real world, the world as he intended it to be.