

Lent 1-A; February 10, 2008
Matthew 4:1-11

“The Word –The Sword of the Spirit”

This is the 1st Sunday in Lent. Just by looking at the altar area, you see that there has been a change. The altar frontal color is now purple, signifying the penitential nature of the season. There are no flowers on the retable, for this is a time of repentance, self-reflection, study, and prayer. Traditionally, no baptisms nor marriages are performed during Lent.

The season of Lent is a serious time in the church’s calendar. In the early church, to keep a good Lent required discipline, and still does. And to see how determined we are in keeping a holy Lent, you and I will be tested. And it is this topic of testing which brings us to our Gospel passage from Matthew. Needed to be kept in mind as we review this passage is that the author is a Jew, writing to the Jewish Church. Thus, Matthew writes having Israelite history in mind, Israel’s history of being tested with harshness and hardships of the wilderness.

Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he did battle with an evil spirit, the devil. This wilderness area was located between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea. The Old Testament Hebrew term calls this area “The Devastation,” an area of some 35 miles long and 15 miles wide. The hills are like dust heaps: limestone blistered from the stone cracking- heat; rocks are bare and jagged. There really is no place in all of Israel where one could be more alone than in this desolate wilderness.

Scripture says that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. There is one thing we need to carefully note in this passage. And that is the meaning of the term *tempt*. The Greek word Matthew used is a term that does not mean tempt in the sense we have come to understand it, that is to entice someone to do wrong, seducing a person to sin, or seeking to make the individual take the wrong way. For the Christian, it is unthinkable that God would tempt a person into wrong doing. The original Greek term means to test the individual, such as Abraham was tested when he was told to kill his son Isaac. God tested Abraham and found him to be righteous. When the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, it is to test him; not tempt him. What the devil did was to tempt Jesus, to do that which was wrong. The entire wilderness experience was a test administered by God. And if God tested Jesus, will he not also test us?

One thing truly stands out in this story. The nature of the testing of Christ was such as could only have come to a person who had very

special powers, and Satan knew that Jesus had these special powers. The testing of Jesus could only have come from one who knew that there were amazing things that Jesus could do. The message for us is that again and again, we are tempted by the devil *through our gifts*. The person who has charm will be tempted through that charm to “Get away with anything.” Granddaughters are great at such charming behaviors, aren’t they? The person who is gifted with the power of words often times is tempted to use that gift to justify their own behavior. Just consider the political times we are in. It is through our gifts that we are tested.

A three year-old entered the kitchen when his mother was busy elsewhere in the house. She told him not to get into the cookies. But in her absence, he pulled a kitchen chair over to the counter and climbed up on it. He then took the lid off the cookie jar and had just gotten a cookie into his mouth when his mother entered the room. She demanded to know what he was doing. The three year-old looked at her with big, innocent eyes and said, “I just climbed up here to smell the cookies, and my tooth got caught on one of them.”

The devil waited until when he thought was the most opportune time to tempt Jesus, at the end of his fast when our Lord was the hungriest. The devil began his temptation of Jesus by saying to him, “If you are the Son of God...” Where have we heard these words before? On Good Friday, as Jesus was hanging upon the cross, the mockers milling around at the base of the cross yelled up at Jesus, “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross and we will believe you.” The devil used the same words as those who were mocking him on Good Friday. Who was speaking through those who mocked Jesus on Good Friday?

The devil said to Jesus, “If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.” This tempting of Jesus had nothing to do with filling the stomach, but had everything to do with fulfilling his call to obedience and fidelity before God. The miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 reveals that Jesus indeed has the ability to do as the devil suggested. However, the breaking of his fast would be a willful act of disobedience against God, thus undercut Jesus’ identity as the obedient, loyal Son of God.

Jesus met each temptation with what Paul describes as “*The sword of the Spirit – the Word of God.*” Jesus’ responded to this first temptation saying, “It is written, man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.” Jesus stated the words of Deuteronomy 6:8, the very same portion of scripture that describes Israel’s own trials and temptations during their 40 years walking in the wilderness of the Sinai Desert.

It may be hard to believe, but the devil actually used scripture in his second temptation of Jesus, Psalm 91, verses 11 and 12. Oh, yes, the devil knows scripture, but uses it out of context and with devious strategies of deceptions and omissions for self-gratification. Gee, where have we heard about such acts before?

The devil begins his second temptation of Jesus by saying, "If you are the Son of God..." Remember the foot of the cross... "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down 400 feet from the highest point in the Temple, for scripture says that the Father will command His angels concerning you, etc..." Where will we hear such words again? At the crucifixion. Matthew 27, verse 43, "the people mocked Jesus saying, "He trusts God, let God rescue Him now, if he delights in Him; for he said 'I am the Son of God.'" Who is speaking through those who are mocking Jesus? The devil, and the devil never quits.

Jesus responded to the devil, again from the same section of Deuteronomy, chapter 6, this time verse 16: "On the other hand, it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

For the third and last temptation, the devil takes Jesus up on the very highest of mountains, showed him all the kingdoms of the world, and said to Jesus, "All these things I will give to you, if you fall down and worship me." For me, this is the dumbest thing the devil could have done! The kingdoms of the world were not ever his to begin with. So how in the wild blue blazes did the devil believe he could give them to the creator who has always owned them? Dumb... But to those who do not know the scriptures, east prey for the devil.

And there is a different tone to this temptation of the devil. Acquiescence to the first two temptations would be self-fulfilling, self aggrandizing; grandstanding, if you will. A gospel built on sensationalism is doomed to failure. This third temptation actually calls for an act of betrayal, an act of treason on the part of Jesus.

Jesus' response to the devil was different this time, for he now names the devil. Jesus said, "Go, Satan!" (In other words, get out of my sight, Satan!) Jesus then quotes the context of two verses from Deuteronomy, 6:13 and 10:20, "...for it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.'"

Jesus' response reflects the command Deuteronomy 6:4-5, called by the Jews, the *Shema*:

4 "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!

5 "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."

This Shema, repeated by the faithful Jews daily, appears in the same chapter and sections of Deuteronomy that Jesus used to respond to the devil. Mere coincidence, I hardly thinks so. Remember the first Commandment we stated a few moments ago? “You shall have no other Gods before me.” In other words, there is no compromise. The Word is true and powerful. Compromise is not an answer to heresy. There is no compromise. ...Satan left Jesus.

Where as Adam failed his testing in the Garden of Eden, Jesus triumphed.

At the heart of this scene in the wilderness is discipline and obedience through humble suffering, testing, and service. As Jesus did, we, too, are to arm ourselves with *the sword of the spirit, the Word of God*. Carl Willis stated in his sermon titled, *Under Attack*, “Read the Word; sing the Word; pray the Word. Whatever you do, get into the Word so that the Word gets into you!”

My brothers and sisters, this parish of St. Bartholomew’s will not provide you with an excuse for not getting into the Word. Friday nights, Fr. Ward leads a Bible study on that awesome book of Daniel. Tuesday nights, men’s fellowship Bible study, and a women’s Bible study Wednesday morning and Thursday nights. At 9:00 each Sunday morning, a Bible study group meets in the undercroft. Jesus wants you to enter into a relationship with Him, and His Word is the key and door to that relationship.

Lent, an excellent time to intensify efforts at being transformed in spirit, to renew our minds by delving into the Word, so that we may offer ourselves as a living sacrifice to God.