

Lent 1, Year A

March 5, 2017

Matthew 3:16-17, 4:1-11

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written,

*'One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

*'He will command his angels concerning you,'
and 'On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"*

Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

*'Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.'"*

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

On the first Sunday in Lent every year, we read the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. And fittingly so, since *our* 40 days in the season of Lent are patterned after *Jesus'* 40 days in the wilderness. *Our* Lenten fasting, praying, and facing our temptations are patterned after **Jesus'** fasting, praying, and facing *his*

temptations. So going deeper into *Jesus'* wilderness experience may help us better understanding the Lenten wilderness journey ahead of **us**.

I included in the Gospel passage that I just read the two verses which come immediately **before** our *assigned* reading, since a majority of Bible scholars agree that Jesus' time in the wilderness can only be understood in the context of his baptism and the voice from heaven which followed: "*This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*" Reflecting on Jesus' temptations and their connection to his baptism, Dr. Tom Long writes: "The devil is not tempting Jesus to misbehave. He is not tempting Jesus to steal a wallet, or [gawk at some online pornography], or cheat on his taxes, or pick a fight with his neighbor. It's deeper than that. The devil is tempting Jesus to ignore his baptism, to deny who he is, to forget that he is the child of his Father in heaven."¹ And that is also *our* greatest temptation: to forget our baptismal identity, who we are in Christ.

Jesus "fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished." Fr. John Shea interprets this as spiritual symbolism. During his 40 days and 40 nights of fasting from physical food, Jesus withdrew, as it were, from the physical realm into the domain of the Spirit, where he was sustained not by bread but by the words that come from the mouth of God. During those 40 days, he pondered those words, chewed on those words, digested those words given at his baptism, "You are my Son, the Beloved," and incorporated them into his deepening understanding of his own identity just as we would incorporate digested physical food into the cells of our physical body. After 40 days in the realm of the Spirit, he returned to the physical realm, and he was (understandably!) physically famished. "The temptations can now begin," writes Fr. Shea. "How will the spiritual truth of Jesus' identity hold up in the physical, religious, and social realms?"² That's what the devil will test.

And make no mistake: it is Jesus' *identity* that the devil attacks, twice beginning his temptings of Jesus with, "***If*** you are the Son of God..." Dr. Long notes that the devil "could have attacked directly [saying]: 'You are **not** the Son of God,' but he was too crafty for that. Much better to generate self-doubt – ***If*** you are the Son of God' – since self-doubt is the cancer that eats away at identity."³

The devil's first temptation, that Jesus turn stones into bread to feed his famished belly, harkens back to Israel's 40 years in the wilderness, when they often found themselves hungry, and begged Moses to give them food. The Israelites' understanding was that if they were hungry, it must mean that God was not with them, did not love them. Full bellies meant God was with them; empty bellies meant that God was not. This is what the devil is hinting at, also, in his tempting Jesus to turn stones into bread: "A full belly means that God is with you and loves you, so if you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread to fill your belly." But Jesus has just spent 40 days with an empty stomach, being nourished by every word that comes from the Father's mouth, and he **knows** that his identity as God's beloved Son is *not* lost because of his empty belly. Fr. Shea

writes: “Jesus rejects this connection between being physically filled and being spiritually loved. The word from the mouth of God was that Jesus is the Beloved Son. He may be full and he may be hungry. But the word remains true in both situations. Negatively stated, Jesus will be empty, but he will still be the Beloved Son.”⁴

The devil next takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple, where eagle’s wings are engraved on the stones of the pinnacle. Fr. Shea writes: “As the wings of a mother eagle catch its young when they flutter in their fledging attempts at flight, so the wings of God will lift up his beloved whenever he falls. Therefore, as the Son of God, Jesus will always be safe. Like the physical fullness, this **safety** will be supplied by supernatural intervention. God’s angels will hover around him, and he will not injure even his foot. The laws of gravity will be suspended.

“... But Jesus thinks this whole way of construing God’s loving care is wrongheaded. You do not put yourself in danger so God can protect you and show others that you are truly God’s Son. In the course of Jesus’ life he will **not** be safe, and yet he will not waver from the conviction that God loves him. Negatively stated, Jesus will be hurt, but he will **still** be the Beloved Son.”⁵

In the final temptation, the devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the earth and their splendor, and tells him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”

“[*This*] temptation has to do with political conquest and power,” notes Fr. Shea. “The assumption is that the kingdoms of the world belong to the devil. If Jesus worships the devil and adopts his ways, he will receive control over these kingdoms. There is a splendor to these kingdoms and so they are powerfully seductive. ...

“But Jesus is a Jew of the first commandment. He only worships ‘the Lord your God.’ He has no other gods, and so Satan’s attempt to substitute *himself* for the true God is rejected with vehemence— ‘Away with you . . .’ Jesus’ refusal to worship Satan means he will not **have** political power and influence in the kingdoms of the world. Negatively stated, Jesus will be politically powerless, but he will **still** be the Beloved Son...

“The devil had tried to seduce Jesus into thinking that what it means to be God’s Son is to be physically full, physically safe, and politically powerful. Jesus refused that interpretation.”⁶

And because *our* baptismal identity is **also**, “Beloved child of God,” the same is true for us: being “Beloved child of God” does not mean that we will never go hungry, never be hurt, never find ourselves victims of the powers of this world. On the contrary: We may find ourselves desperately hungry – not only for physical food, but for attention and affection. We may find ourselves deeply

wounded – not only physically, but psychologically and emotionally. We may find ourselves powerless to change some situation in order to make things better for ourself or a loved one. All these may be true, and yet our identity as God’s beloved child remains.

One of the nefarious aspects of the devil’s temptations is that they tempt Jesus to think that his identity is uncertain and conditional, contingent on Jesus taking action. He must **do** something to bolster his identity – turn stones into bread, miraculously call on angels to keep him from falling, or obtain the kingdoms of the world by his own power. Likewise, I think this is perhaps **our** major temptation: to be persuaded that we must *construct* and *protect* our own identity, our own worthiness, by things we do or accomplish. The problem, of course, is that **if** my identity is something I have to construct or achieve by my own effort, then I can just as well *lose* that identity or worthiness if I goof up or make some dread mistake. My identity becomes uncertain and precarious if **I** have to construct it out there in the external world, rather than *receiving* my identity from God in the depths of my soul.

Advertisers and marketers are always telling us what it is that we lack – and that *their product* can supply. They tell us we aren’t attractive enough, but their product – wrinkle cream, or a diet plan, or exercise program – will **make** us acceptable. The result is that we come to believe that who we are – our very identity – is dependent on our doing something or buying something or making ourselves smarter, richer, more pious, or more attractive. But the Bible tells us that our identity is not *achieved*, but **given**. We are children of God from the moment we were conceived, and that identity is revealed, affirmed, and strengthened in our baptism into Christ.

In the preface to our Eucharistic Prayer today, there is a quote from the Letter to the Hebrews, stating that Jesus was “in every way tempted as we are, yet did not sin.”⁷ I used to find that passage discouraging, thinking that it meant, “*Jesus* was faced with all the same temptations you are, Mark, and **he** didn’t sin; how come *you’re* such a screw-up?” But now I think it means something different. You see, the word for “sin” in the New Testament Greek is an archery term that literally means “to miss the mark.” So, what if the author of the Letter to the Hebrews is not saying that Jesus never did anything bad, but is rather saying that he stayed true to the mark, stayed true to his identity as a beloved child of God?

“Jesus may be conscious of his true identity in a clear and immediate way,” Fr. Shea writes, “but for most of us it is a more labored and reflective effort. We do not always remember our spiritual identity. So temptations appear to us as options, possibilities that have to be weighed rather than demonic invitations that have to be dismissed. In particular, temptations are attractive because they appeal to our *fantasy* selves... ‘[T]his [temptation] is the opportunity, our good fortune to have what we always wanted—a life that is always satiated, without injury, and

rippling with splendiferous power.’ How can we remember who we are when we are offered this tantalizing possibility of who we might become?”⁸

The solution is to be ever grounded in our **true** identity as “beloved child of God.” For if we are absolutely *sure* that we are God’s beloved child, as Jesus was, we will act according, *doing* those things Jesus would do and *avoiding* those he would not do; and it would all flow from who we are in God.

Perhaps Fr. Shea sums it up best: When faced with temptations, he says, “The best way to say no is to be in touch with a stronger yes.”

AMEN

¹ Thomas G. Long, “Facing Up to Temptation,” *Whispering the Lyrics*, Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, 1995, p. 20

² John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 103

³ Long, *ibid.*

⁴ Shea, p. 104

⁵ Shea, pp. 104-105

⁶ Shea, p. 105

⁷ *Book of Common Prayer* p. 346; Hebrews 4:15

⁸ Shea, p. 107

⁹ Shea, p. 107