

The purple is out, the Alleluias are gone, and Lent has officially begun. Our seasonal changes in the church year lend themselves to sermon series—and oftentimes, I don't even have to change the lectionary texts! This year, the Gospel texts during Lent feature several encounters that Jesus has: with the devil, with Nicodemus, with the Samaritan woman at the well, with the man born blind, and with his friend Lazarus. Each week, we'll take a look at these stories and explore what impact these particular encounters have on Jesus, on the implications of the Gospel, and on us.

We begin this first week of Lent, as we always do, with the story of Jesus going into the wilderness for forty days to be tempted by the devil. This happens just after Jesus is baptized, when a voice from above calls out, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:17) *Immediately*, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness.

The gospel text tells us that he goes there *specifically* to be tempted by the devil, although it's unclear why. Whatever God's reasoning, Jesus goes and the devil comes to test him.

The devil says, “Create some food for yourself!” And Jesus responds with words from Deuteronomy: “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

The devil comes back with, “Why not jump off this highest part of the temple since angels will be sure to catch you?” The devil can quote scripture, too, and uses Psalm 91 to try and convince Jesus. Once again, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy, quotes the Law and states that no one is to put God to the test.

Finally, in a last-ditch effort, the devil tries to tempt Jesus with an easy life: wealth, power, military might...a life quite different from the one Jesus has led so far and quite different from the path to the cross laid out before him. An easy life, and all Jesus has to do is fall down in worship. And just like before, Jesus comes back with words from Deuteronomy about how God is to be worshiped.

Three temptations, trying to get at Jesus from different angles. The devil tries to attack through Jesus' hunger, Jesus' divine powers that never get to be displayed to their full advantage, and Jesus' bleak future filled with adversity, torture, and death. But none of the devil's suggestions work. None of the temptations take. Jesus is able to resist them all.

So, what does this one-on-one tell us? What is the impact here on Jesus and on his ministry?

I like to think of Jesus' time in the desert as a time of preparation—a time of getting things together and making sure that he is ready for everything that is about to come. He's just been baptized, so his ministry has been inaugurated...but he hasn't actually *done* anything yet. No acts of power, no miracles, no teachings. His first act of ministry is this time in the desert.

The first thing he does to care for us is to take on the devil, head-on. He is faced with temptation because *we* are. If Christ is to be fully human, that'll include facing forces that will try to sway him away from serving God. Of course, Christ overcomes these temptations and eventually comes back into society and jumps right in, proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven has come near and calling his first disciples.

As he embarks on his ministry, Jesus leads by example. He feeds people who are hungry. He blesses people who are normally overlooked. He comforts people who are afraid. He heals people who are sick. He lifts up love as the highest authority: love of God and love of our neighbor.

And that time Jesus spent in the wilderness? That was an example, too.

God knows that we are tempted, all the time, by all kinds of things.

There are the small things, like the temptation to stay up late and finish a book because it's really good and you have just a few more chapters left but you have to get up early for work. Anyone else face that temptation? Or maybe it's the more common temptation of whether or not to have that last cup of coffee in the afternoon...the caffeine couldn't effect your sleep *that* much, right?

But we are tempted by other things, too, things that are central to how we live in our world, to how we relate to our neighbor and God.

We are tempted to hoard our money and goods. Maybe not as bad as the hoarders who have magazines dating back twenty years and so many piles of stuff that a path has to be created to move around their house...but we're tempted to hoard none the less. When we go through our homes to clean stuff out, we reminisce and think about all the "what ifs." What if I end up needing that next year? What if I decide to pick up that random hobby I did for two weeks three years ago again? What if I am able to fit back into that pant size I haven't worn since college? How can I be more generous with my money? What if *I* end up needing it more down the road?

But possessions aren't the only thing we're tempted by. We're tempted by control, especially control of our bodies and our health.

When I got pregnant the first time, I was amazed at the attempts to control everything that permeate pregnancy and early parenthood. There were articles about how to never get morning sickness, how to avoid stretch marks, how to have a "belly-only" pregnancy, how to ensure that you won't have a c-section, how to have an "easy" or "pain-free" labor—without medication!

And then after the baby comes, be sure to read about how you can definitely get your baby sleeping through the night at four weeks old! Find out the surefire way to triple your milk

supply! Buy this product or that product that will magically make your baby fall asleep or make them a genius or prevent them from feeling teething pain!

It's ridiculous. Every person is different. Every pregnancy is different and every baby is different, but *man* do we want to be able to control as much as we can! And this occurs in all kinds of ways, not just around mothers and babies.

Do this workout three times a week and see these exact results! Eat this superfood and watch your health improve with no other changes to your lifestyle! Have this procedure or take this medication and you can be *sure* that you'll live a long healthy life! Adopt this daily habit and see your wealth triple! Realistically, we know that there are no guarantees... but, *man*, are we tempted by the thought of one.

We're also tempted by ideas of our own importance. We get so set in our own ways and so set in our own ideas that we stop listening to others and even sometimes stop listening to God. We convince ourselves that we know everything and understand how everything works and so we don't take the time to hear what anyone else has to say.

This is something I've seen to an increasing degree in our public discourse. When someone says something we don't agree with, we tend to just write them off instead of really trying to hear their point of view. By listening, we won't always reach an agreement, but at least we'd be in a better place than if we just ignore them all together.

So yes, we are tempted—and in more ways than I've just mentioned. But we have Jesus to look to. Now we know that we can't resist temptation like Jesus can—and God *definitely* knows that we can't—so what are we to do with this story? It's aspirational, certainly. But it's not the most realistic for a humanity that is steeped in sin and who constantly need God to forgive us.

Instead, I think Jesus is giving us tools. What do we do when we are tempted? Go back to the Word of God. Listen to what God is saying. We won't get it right every time, but at least some of the time we'll have a fighting chance.

When you're facing temptation, in whatever form that might take, remember that we can find strength and resolve in the Word of God. Words that remind us who we are and who we belong to. Words that remind us to show compassion and generosity. Words that remind us to seek justice and peace. Remember that God's presence is always with us. And remember that Jesus has been there. Jesus was tempted and overcame so that we might find forgiveness when we fail to resist temptation ourselves.

Amen.