

Stanford Memorial Church

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THE DEVIL AND ST. FRANCIS

C. George Fitzgerald. S.T.D.

Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 2.15-17 and 3.1-7

Gospel Lesson: Matthew 4.1-11

Have you ever had the experience of seeing something you feel you just have to buy? You may even save up a little in order to purchase it. But after a while, once you get it home, you find yourself thinking why did I buy this? What was I thinking? How could I have wasted my money on this? Well if you have had this experience, we might call it the “sorry shopping syndrome,” you will readily appreciate the two scripture lessons for today.

The first story goes back to the beginning of time. Adam and Eve are placed in the Garden of Eden, the perfect paradise. They have everything they could possibly need or want. But there is one restriction, one “no, no.” There just happens to be one restriction: there happens to be a certain tree, called “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,” which is conveniently placed in the middle of the garden; you cannot miss it. But they are not only forbidden to eat of the fruit of this tree, but they also must not even touch it. We all know what happened, as Eve is tempted by a very persuasive serpent who says to her, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” We can readily imagine some of the “sorry-shopping syndrome”

thoughts that may have gone through Eve's mind: "If God did not want us to eat this fruit, why did he put this tree right in the center of the garden so we could not avoid it?" . . . , "and why does he not want us to be like him and have the knowledge of good and evil" . . ."if we had that we could even be more helpful." So here at the very beginning of creation, we learn that temptation and disobedience is built into the fabric of our existence.

Fast forward to today and here we are at the very first Sunday in Lent which always begins with the very same story: the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, which is found in each of the first three gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. While many traditions are associated this time of Lent, I suspect that the very least known one is that for the last 12 years or so, here at Memorial Church, the offering collected for the six Sundays in Lent as well as Easter are used to help support the clinical pastoral education program at Stanford Hospital which is primarily for seminary students and ministers, to provide compassionate care to patients and family members coping with a serious illness. And during the six Sundays of Lent as well as Easter, you will have an opportunity to meet one of these chaplain residents as they volunteer to read the first scripture lesson of the worship service. I could not avoid the temptation to sneak in that little commercial for our CPE program at Stanford Hospital.

A second part of this tradition, which you may just have to learn to put up with, is that the director of the Spiritual Care Service is asked to preach the sermon on the first Sunday in Lent; and you might think after 12 years or so of preaching on the same text on the same Sunday in Lent, I would either be totally speechless or else would have some kind of incredible, penetrating insight to share. Well, I leave up to you to decide. The week that precedes this first Sunday in Lent is unlike any other in the year The worldly spring-time

gayety and new life sort of bumps up against the season of spiritual renewal. One of the earliest pre-Lenten celebrations began in Venice in 1162, when the joyful citizens decided to celebrate a major naval victory by dancing around St. Mark's square. Over the years it evolved into a month of masked frivolity in the square of St. Mark. Or if, in our day, you head to South America for the four days preceding Ash Wednesday, you will find almost the entire nation of Brazil celebrating Carnival as they dance and parade in the streets. And here in the United States everyone is aware of our Mardi Gras version of spring frivolity which occurs every Fat Tuesday in New Orleans; and if you spend much time eating in that wonderful city you might justifiably think that the "Fat" is derived from the rich and wonderful meals served there; and you would be partially true. In actuality the word Mardi Gras is the English translation of the French "Fat Tuesday," and the practice in France was to gorge yourself on food on Tuesday night in anticipation of denying yourself certain pleasures and having more austere meals during the season of Lent.

Then we come to Ash Wednesday, which is 46 days before Easter, but it is also the first day of the 40 days of Lent—which also ends in Easter. So how can Ash Wednesday be both 46 days before Easter as well as the first of the 40 days of Lent which also ends with Easter? And the answer is: the six Sundays are not counted as part of the 40 days of Lent. So today is the first Sunday *in* Lent, not the first Sunday *of* Lent. and traditionally Lent is the time to focus on the earthly ministry of Jesus, to reflect on his words and practices, and to consider changes in our life that would contribute to Jesus' vision of compassion, caring for those in need, and pursuing justice. In the Roman Catholic tradition, Lent is the time to focus on the practice of choosing to "give up" something for Lent. One of the reasons for this practice is to

align ourselves with the simplicity of life as well as service to others, which characterized the life of Jesus. So certain pleasures are “given up” for lent, such as meat or sugar and—as far as I can tell the one most popular— chocolate. On the Protestant side--whether by accident of design, I don’t know—the emphasis for Lent has not been on denial, on what I am giving up, but on identifying something extra or special as a part of our Lenten observation. But rather than agonizing over what to give up or what to do extra, I suspect the most fulfilling may be to do both: for example, for Lent I will give up sugary colas while also volunteering to help serve a meal each week at a homeless shelter.

As the Adam and Eve story was placed at the very beginning of the Old Testament, or the Jewish scriptures, so too the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness occurs at the very outset of his ministry; and the parallels are quite striking.

Immediately preceding his temptation for 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus inaugurated his ministry and life of faith by being baptized by John the Baptist in the river Jordan. At that glorious moment,, the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove and a voice from heaven declared, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” The sacredness of the moment echoes the purity of the Garden of Eden.

But this is only half of the story, and it stands incomplete without the second half. Moments of joy and moments of anguish . . . the baptism spiritual high, and then the same Spirit that descended on Jesus at the climax of his baptism, proceeds to drive him into the terrible wilderness wasteland for 40 days and nights to be tempted by the devil. The baptism and the darkness form the yin and yang of the ministry of Jesus. They somehow, mysteriously and inconceivably belong together. In many Asian cultures there is a strong prohibition that

one should never boast too loudly about good fortune, because it is tantamount to inviting the devil to rectify the balance by bringing suffering and misfortune. We instinctively inquire, “Why does it have to be this way: . . . and why not have Jesus just proceed from the baptism to his wonderful teachings and marvelous healings?”

When we hear the word “devil,” we tend to associate this being with the bad things of life—pain, suffering, destruction, and death; and these things are probably true. But these are the after-affects. Like the sorry shopping syndrome, the enticement and temptation regularly and cunningly cloaks itself in much more subtle attire. In essence, Jesus was lavished with overwhelming possibilities, and he could have said “yes,” as men and women have throughout the ages, to one or all of them. He could have said “yes” to having ample bread or *material wealth*. He could be richer than Bill Gates and Warren Buffet combined. Or he could have said “yes” to the promise of a life of *miraculous fame*; he would be the first person to win both an Oscar in Hollywood and a Nobel prize in Norway. Or he could say “yes” to the third and equally beguiling temptation of *power*; he would be the ruler of their greatest kingdom the earth has ever known, surpassing Alexander the great and all the rest.

Yet at each step along the way of the forty-day ordeal of stress and temptation Jesus consistently says “no.” “No” to material riches. “No” to the allure of fame. And “No” to the enticement of power. Perhaps the most subtle and enticing aspect of these trials and tribulations is the clever way in which the devil, at one point, makes use of scripture, when he declares, “It is written, ‘God will give his angels charge of you . . . On their hands they will bear you up.’” This has always been the ultimate refuge and weapon of charlatans, false prophets, terrorists and sectarian gurus . . . whether it be Hitler inflicting inconceivable destruction

while proclaiming, “Good mit uns,” or Osama bin Laden dispatching suicide hijackers in the name of Allah. Ultimately, the demonic duplicity of these deceivers becomes painfully evident.

When we reflect further on the temptations of Jesus, we may find ourselves asking, “What was it that enabled Jesus to prevail? To remain faithful and to say “no” to the beguiling enticements that ultimately represented disobedience to God? I do not think the problem was wealth, fame and power *per se*, but rather when they become the idols of one’s life. I suspect Jesus recognized that the self-absorbing lifestyles have a way, when compulsively followed to their conclusion, to eventuate in their opposite. The Greeks had a word for this phenomenon. They called it *enantiadromia*:the ability of anything followed unthinkingly to turn into its exact opposite. Midas and his blind pursuit of god is a case in point. He touches his daughter and she turns into gold. “His one-dimensional ability immobilizes everything he loves to a currency that can never replace the real, underlying pulse of life” Or as Constantine Cavafy expresses it in his poem Walls,

Ah why did I not pay attention when they were building the

Walls.

But I never heard any noise or sound of builders.

Imperceptibly they shut me from the outside world.

A second factor that enabled Jesus, in a state of exhaustion, to resist overwhelming temptations had much to do with who he was and what represented. At his earlier baptism he received the unquestionable conviction that the fullness of God dwelt within him. As many of

you know, the Bay Area was once again blessed by the visit of the Dalai Lama who made the observation that we are all born with a seed of compassion within us. We are born to reach out and care for one another. It is easy for this seed to be lost or overwhelmed by the endless striving for fame and success.

Behind all the outward trappings of accomplishment and success, there invariably lies a never ending question, which we often try to avoid, but which persistently remains. That question is: What are we living for? And it is the seed of compassion planted within us that enables us to live the answer to that question. Eleven centuries after the life of Jesus a wealthy young man of Assisi pondered that question of “What am I living for?” and found the answer by declining the wealth his father had garnered from his profitable silk business and decided to devote his life to nurturing the seed of compassion planted within him. And of course the good works of St. Francis became a model of a life devoted to the good of others and found a much more significant wealth and sense of fulfillment.

Just about a year ago another Francis arrived on the scene in the form of the pope of the Roman Catholic Church. His ability to set aside the trappings of wealth, power and fame in order to focus on the poor and dispossessed has captured the attention and the enthusiasm millions of people around the earth. I recently commented to the priest on our staff, “If the current Francis had been the pope in sixteenth century Europe, I am not sure the Reformation would have taken place.

Today of course is the first Sunday in Lent, a time when men and women of faith traditionally focus on the earthly life of Jesus. We do this in the conviction that the more we understand Jesus the more we understand ourselves—and what it means to find our meaning

and fulfillment in the spirit. The temptations of Jesus set the stage in a dramatic way, exposing the forces that dehumanize, beguile and lead us from our true spiritual path. Jesus stands as the model of the one who says “Yes” to God and “No” to that which seeks to replace God. The poet Robert Frost once commented, in a typically succinct yet profound way,

Something we were withholding

made us weak

Until we found it was ourselves.

The story of the temptation in essence reminds us that, like Jesus, when we say “Yes” to God, to the fundamental spiritual reality of life, and “No” to that which would replace the spirit and our seed of compassion, then we find our true selves. Amen