



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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The Temptations of the Church

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 26, 2023

The First Sunday in Lent

Based on Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen

A Christian theologian was once asked why more young people don't attend church. He responded, "Because they don't believe anything real takes place there." For too many people, nothing real happens in church. "Church" for them is all about hypocrisy and pretense. It's a place where judgmental people listen to fantastical stories; a place where the spiritual is manipulated for material gain. And, the feeling goes, while there may not be much harm in it, there's nothing much to be gained by it either.

On this Sunday, the First Sunday in Lent, when we begin our annual Lenten observances, and, on the occasion of our Annual Parish Meeting, it might be good to state clearly that something "real" is taking place here today.

This past Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, was about as real as it gets when hundreds of people came here for the imposition of ashes and to be told, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." In other words, "Remember you're mortal. Remember you'll die one day. Remember your body will eventually return to its original elements—the vestiges of distant stars."

The church may be dying round about us, but the spiritual search for something real and true is just as alive as ever. So, let's talk about the truth in today's gospel lesson.

While the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, mention Jesus being tested by Satan, only Matthew and Luke provide detailed accounts of the experience. Immediately following the baptism of Jesus by John in the River Jordan, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the Judean wilderness. Interesting that it's the Spirit leading Jesus to a place of temptation. It's as if he must endure this—suffer this—in order to be prepared for the even greater ordeals his calling will require.

"The temptation Jesus faces in the wilderness comes after fasting '40 days and 40 nights,' a specification that would resonate with Matthew's predominantly Jewish Christian community.

- The rain of the great flood fell upon the earth for 40 days and nights while Noah and his family waited for their deliverance from evil and rain, as God promised.
- Moses fasted alone in the presence of the Lord for 40 days and nights atop Mount Sinai as he wrote the Ten Commandments.

- Elijah followed the Lord's urging and fasted for 40 days and nights as he fled to Mount Sinai, where he encountered God.
- Jesus endures 40 days and nights of fasting and solitude in the wilderness and arrives at a critical junction where his loyalty to God the Father is tested through his confrontation with the 'tester.' (In the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the word *peirazon* is translated as 'tempter, who was also called the 'devil.')

So, this 40 days and 40 nights of fasting in the wilderness was probably not intended as a literal period of time. It's more like what we might call "a month of Sundays."

And, at the end of this period of fasting, Jesus encounters "the tempter." Now the great thing about temptation in every kind of literature is that the tempter always knows the tempted. The tempter always knows which buttons to push. The tempter always knows precisely where the soft underbelly of his target is located. Are you vain? Insecure? Prone to addiction? Distrustful? Proudful? Fearful? Physical? Whatever it is that you're naturally drawn to, well then that's the package in which your temptation will come.

Jesus is just about to begin his public ministry, and the tempter begins with a direct questioning of his core identity. "Are you who you think you are?" "Are you who you say you are?"

Henri Nouwen said the three encounters Jesus has with the devil are the temptations to be "relevant, spectacular, and powerful."ⁱⁱ

1. *"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."*

If. If you are the Son of God. If. In other words, there's some doubt that you truly are "the Son of God." So, who wouldn't want to help the hungry? Who doesn't want to assist the poor? What could possibly be wrong with wanting to be relevant, useful, practical? Yet this was not the calling of Jesus. And it isn't our ultimate calling, either.

2. *"Then the devil took (Jesus) 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.'"*

In other words, "If you are who you say you are, you should be spectacular!" This is the temptation to be amazing. To be stunning and impressive and extraordinary. If. If you are the Son of God, then bedazzle us with your gifts. And how we do love to bedazzle and be bedazzled!

3. Again, the devil took Jesus 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."*

In other words, be powerful! Lean into your authority! You can hear the tempter saying, "Don't get caught up in that 'minor' stipulation that you worship me! Don't you want all the power the world holds? Jesus, just think of all the good you could do with it!"

Christian Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote, "We create ourselves by our choices." Choosing to embrace (or ignore) these temptations determined who Christ became.

Now the interesting thing about temptation is that it's not only an individual phenomenon. Entire institutions can succumb to temptation. Institutional culture can conspire with the powers of this world to "corrupt and destroy the creatures of God." How is St. Bartholomew's Church in the City of New York tempted? I would say we are tempted precisely as Jesus was tempted.

“Command these stones to become loaves of bread.” We can be swept up in caring for the material needs of the people, while forgetting their spiritual needs are equally important. Jesus reminded us that “the poor will be with us always,” not to suggest we should be indifferent to the poor, but to remind us of our higher calling to deal with their spiritual poverty as well. Relevancy is a temptation for every church looking at shrinking membership and income. But relevancy is an illusion, a temptation. We are truly relevant only when we are centered in Christ.

“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the pinnacle.” Be spectacular. Over the past several weeks we have done everything we could possibly think of to entice people to enter this church. We have presented you with extraordinary classical music. We have offered dynamic preaching. We have entertained you with Chinese lions. We have fed you egg rolls, gumbo, pancakes, donuts. We have offered jazz music, appealed to your intellectual curiosities with forum speakers and classes. We have created emails, websites, outdoor signage. But have we succumbed to the temptation of merely being spectacular?

Asking whether our music or preaching or programming is as good, or better, than what’s being offered at St. Thomas or St. James’ or Trinity Wall Street is asking the wrong question. And I confess they’re questions I’m asking all the time. I keep wondering how we can be even more spectacular so more people will come through our doors. In what ways are we trying to “leap from the pinnacle” when we need to be grounded in a gospel of humility, service, and radical discipleship.

“Again, the devil took (Jesus) and showed him all the kingdoms of the world, and he said to him, *‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’*” We are tempted by power. And financial power in New York City is the coin of the realm. It is easy to imagine our problems being over if we just had more access to greater resources. It is easy to imagine our victory won if we had a larger endowment or another development rights sale.

And in what ways are we tempted by all the smaller seductions? I mean, aren’t we tempted to just give up and to say, “It’s too hard. It just can’t be done.” Aren’t we tempted to say, “My efforts won’t make a substantial difference anyway.” Aren’t we tempted to say, “I’ll allow the wealthier members of the parish to carry these financial burdens of which they speak. I don’t really feel any a financial obligation to this community. Someone else will carry me.”

People and institutions will always face temptations large and small. And our identities will be formed by our responses to the temptations we face. Real questions are being asked here and real responses to the world’s needs are being formed here every single day.

This, this is as real as it gets.

Amen.

ⁱ Robert A. Bryant, *Feasting on the Word, Yr. A, Volume 2*, edited by David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, Westminster/John Knox Press, c. 2010, page 47

ⁱⁱ Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus; Reflections on Christian Leadership*, Crossroads Publishing, c. 1989