

February 18, 2015 Ash Wednesday

The observance of Lent is based upon Jesus's time of temptation in the wilderness following his baptism by John in the Jordan. It was a very powerful experience for Jesus and he went into the wilderness to spend time pondering its meaning. It turned out to be a time of temptation.

Both St. Paul and St. Augustine had a strong sense of sin being more than a list of forbidden actions. They saw it as a power against which they had to actively struggle. St. Paul bemoaned the fact that Though he wanted to do the right and worked to do so, sin was often the result "wretched man that I am." Where does sin get its power?

We human beings are animals in the mammal group; dogs cats, squirrels, monkeys, lions, kangaroos, etc. Yet we are the only ones that sin. All of us mammals have the same physical needs and are constructed in the same way. And our behaviors are similar in a whole host of ways. Why are we the only sinners?

All of us mammals are hard wired by our creator with two switches. One activates us for survival; the other activates us for the immediate gratification of our immediate physical needs for food and water. But because God created us human beings in his own image we are more intelligent and have a keen sense of unique self identity and a greater ability to anticipate future conditions and events. These two abilities come together to form a third motivating switch called "my best interest." There are many things we chose to do or not to do because we believe that they will or will not be "in my best interest" at some time in the future.

Jesus went into the wilderness with a very powerful sense of self identity, "Son of God," so he would have reason to believe that he had miraculous powers. The temptations he experienced called him to use them "in my best interest" it was the Son of God's "best interest" to have enough to eat. Why not dip into all that power and create a nice little picnic for himself here in the wilderness? He will need to gain credibility to gain converts. Wouldn't it be in his "best interest" to do something really spectacular like jumping off the roof of the Temple and landing unhurt on the plaza below? But there might still be those who would refuse to believe, who would resist. Wouldn't it be in Jesus "best interest" to monopolize all the military, political, and economic power in the world to prevent that right in the beginning? I can imagine Satan using his most unctuous used car salesman voice saying "as God's Son it would really be in your best interest. You owe it to yourself."

I think we are getting a clue as to where sin originates and why it is so powerful at times, our fantasies about the chimera called "our best interest." Our ability to imagine future possibilities may cause us to act as if they were not just possibilities but hard fact. Fantasy become reality for us. We are in a state of temptation. The important question is what action we will take.

A few minutes ago, I said that humans are the only animals that sin. When I was at the Martinez VA hospital, I was visiting with a patient who told me that he and a lady friend were living together but were not married. He said that they did this because if they married their combined Social Security income would be reduced. He asked if they were living in sin. The Cold War was

still on at the time. So I told him that the U.S. and the Soviet Union were living in sin. Not only that but the Palestinians and the Israelis were also living in sin. To live in sin is to live in a state of hostility, and hatred. In the creation story in Genesis, Cain murdered Abel because of the emotional state that he was in, not because Abel threatened his survival or prevented him from getting the food and water that he needed.

I know that animals have emotions. But I do not believe that they have the capacity for abstract hatred as we humans do. Even the predators kill only when hungry and the prey is immediately available. They are only fulfilling their role, in the great scheme of God's management of life here on earth, the scheme we call the ecology. God's call to us is different. He has made us in his own image to care for all the creatures on the earth and the earth itself. God is love. When we say that we are made in his image we too are called to love not to harbor hatred hostility and antipathy.

We are still a work in progress as a species and as individuals. We are the only creatures that sin, because we are the only ones that do not fulfill God's unique calling. If we are to observe a Holy Lent, we must do as Jesus did in the wilderness. We must refuse to worship that idol called "my best interest." Only then will we become the incarnate, life giving spirits of God's love. Let us remember that "my best interest " often has no reality of its own. It may be just the fantasy of our striving selves.

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