

Homily for First Sunday of Lent, Year (B)
for St. Anthony Messenger Press Lenten Audio Series
by
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Three Temptations of Christ

The Gospel reading for this First Sunday of Lent brings us two questions. The first question is, "Why was Jesus tempted by the devil? Wasn't he the Son of God, of the same substance with the Father, God from God, light from light? Why should Jesus have to struggle with the wiles of the evil one?"

Well, Jesus was tempted by the devil for the same reason that he was baptized by John: because he was a human being. When Jesus came from Nazareth to be baptized in the Jordan by John, it was in order to associate himself with the religious currents of His time. He didn't need the remission of sin as the others did who came to John for Baptism. Jesus was sinless, but he was human, and he wanted to be seen and known as sharing the human experiences of ordinary men and women. Insofar as it was possible for him, Jesus wanted to be just like everybody else. That's why he shared in the Baptism of John.

And, that's also why Jesus allowed himself to be tempted by Satan. Every human being has experienced the lure of evil. Every human being has been invited to turn his or her back to God and walk the path of self-indulgence and arrogance that Adam and Eve opened up for their descendants. One would not really be

human if one had never had any contact whatsoever with the attractiveness of sin. That's why Jesus went off to the desert: to give the devil his chance, to experience the appeal of evil that infects every human being.

The Gospels of Matthew and of Luke tell us about Jesus' temptations in greater detail than does the Gospel of Mark that we read in this Year B. The devil tempts Jesus with comfort, inviting him to provide bread for himself from the stones. The devil tempts Jesus with easy success, urging him to throw himself down from the temple and everybody would admire him. The devil tempts Jesus with power. He offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the earth if Jesus would give himself over to the devil. And Jesus resists them all. It was a time of danger and threat for him, in the midst of the wildness of the beasts. Yet, as the text says, "the angels ministered to him." They protected him and guided him in the desert just as the Israelites in the exodus has been protected and guided in the desert by the Lord.

Jesus was tempted by the devil because he was a human being, fully human like the rest of us, though unwounded by sin. That's the answer to our first question.

The second question that this reading raises is about us. Why does the Church give us the narrative of the temptation of Jesus every year on the First Sunday of Lent? One would think that there might be some other aspect of Jesus' life that would

be more appropriate for the beginning of the penitential season—perhaps His Baptism, or Jesus' teaching about the need for loving our neighbor? No, what the Church is teaching us here is that, during Lent, we are supposed to do the same thing Jesus did; that is, we are supposed to go apart from our ordinary life and face up to the evil that threatens us. We are supposed to acknowledge that the devil is after us and that we need to respond and react to the devil's overtures.

The temptations that threaten us don't come in the same lurid forms in which Matthew and Luke show us the temptations of Jesus, but Jesus' temptations and ours are basically the same. We are all tempted to comfort, not the ordinary comfort that God means us to have, but the comfort that we achieve through selfishness and indulgence. We are all tempted to success, to be somebody, no matter what the cost. We are all tempted to power: to run things, to run people, to be in charge. These are basic human desires, desires that we are inclined to answer at any cost, no matter what it takes. These are inclinations that we need to be aware of, inclinations that we need to confront.

By giving us the narrative of Jesus' temptations at the beginning of each Lent, the Church is calling us to come to grips with the temptations that afflict each one of us. Lent is supposed to be a kind of desert that we enter each year, a place where we face up to the evil that afflicts us from outside us as

well as the evil that afflicts us from inside. Unlike Jesus, we are sinners. We have given in, in great things or small, to the self-destructive attractions that the devil presented to Jesus. We need to acknowledge that and we need to do something about it.

Dealing with our sinfulness is not something we take on gladly; it's not something we do with enthusiasm. To admit that there is evil in our lives is already distasteful. To try to eradicate it is harder still. Yet unless we are realistic about our condition, we will remain detached from the life that the Lord intends us to live; we will remain weakened in our sharing in the life of Christ.

We are all among the wild beasts like Jesus was in the wilderness. But just as Jesus was in the wilderness in order to experience our full humanity, so also Jesus will be with us as we strive to come to grips with the same kinds of temptations that he endured.

Being a Catholic Christian believer involves living the life of Christ. During Lent the Church invites us to live with Jesus in his desert experience, to undergo trial with him and to come out of the desert at the end, ready to share a time of fulfillment with him in the kingdom of God.