

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

It occurred to me recently, as I have been getting us ready for Lent here at Grace, that the season of Lent could be compared to an annual check-up for our spiritual health. It is an opportunity to take stock of our relationship with God, with our fellow human beings, and with the rest of God's creation. Lent compels us to confront some unpleasant realities about ourselves. The purpose is not to shame or scold us, although sometimes a little shame and scolding are in order. The purpose is to be honest about the state of our lives so that something might be done about it. Like a visit to the doctor, the discipline of Lent might not be what we'd choose to do for fun, but it's worth the trouble. In case you weren't with us this past Wednesday, here's how I introduced the discipline of Lent: self-examination and repentance, prayer and fasting, sacrificial giving and works of love—strengthened by the gifts of word and sacrament.

In the spirit of encouraging us in that discipline, I want to touch on three things in the readings before us this morning. The first is the nature of Jesus' temptation, the second is the nature of sin, especially from our first and second readings, and the third is what is at stake in the encounter of Jesus and the devil, or Satan, or the tempter—he's called all three.

Today's text is the only time we have explicit mention of Jesus fasting, but in all of the Gospels he is continually going off on his own to pray. Here in today's Gospel reading he is led into the wilderness, off on his own, by the Spirit, to be tempted. That word, "tempted," has several meanings. It can also mean to be tested. So the tempter here could be thought of as a "tester." The Greek word for devil means "slanderer," one who makes false and damaging statements. The word Satan comes from Hebrew, and it means adversary. It's most often used for human beings in the Old Testament. In the book of Job, the character of Satan seems to be a kind of quality-control agent working for God, whose job it is to test Job to see if he will break (like crash testing a car.) It's very important to realize that the power of Satan and the devil in the Bible is not the supernatural, special-effects kind of power that you find in horror movies. It is rather the power of deception and lying for the purpose of undermining people's faith and trust in God. That's what's going on in the first reading from Genesis, and what's going on in Jesus' temptation.

The second thing to notice in our readings today is the nature of sin and its origin. As a rule, any reading of the Genesis 2 and 3 should never go uncommented upon in a church service. Because of long history of problematic interpretation, that story cannot stand on its own. And that's because most people will hear the creation of the woman from the rib of the first human and her role as helper to the man as meaning that she was inferior to him, even though the text doesn't say that or mean to say it. (We didn't read that part of Genesis 2 this morning, but it's surely lurking in the background for many of us.) Most people will also hear that all of this is the woman's fault because *she* was the one who decided to eat the forbidden fruit, and because a number of the early church fathers imposed their patriarchal bias on this passage and sexualized it. I want you to notice that at least two things from our readings today surely contradict such an interpretation. The first is that the woman was not alone when she ate the fruit. The man was standing right there with her. He didn't stop her, and he ate the fruit too. The second is that in commenting on this passage in his letter to the Romans – the text we have for our second reading – Paul does not make a big deal of the woman's involvement. In fact, if you didn't have the Genesis text available and had to go just by what Paul said about it, you wouldn't even know the woman was involved at all. It would seem to be just about Adam. It's not that Paul doesn't know the story of the woman. He's just not interested in making her a scapegoat. And the word he uses

for man is really better translated “human” or “person” today. In other words, Paul is saying that sin came into the world through a human being, and it is taken away by a human being in Jesus. That’s his only point.

Back to the Genesis reading. Notice that the serpent is not called Satan or the devil. It’s just a serpent. But it does take on the role of a “Satan” – an adversary – and it does use deceit and slander to undermine trust in God. The temptation is this: “Maybe *God* doesn’t know what’s best for you. Maybe *you* should decide.” It’s the first advertising campaign. “You deserve this thing! *You* are what is important! Take it!” In other words, trust yourself, not God. Take charge of your own life.

And that leads us to the third thing to notice in our texts this morning: Once the humans trust this other voice and act on it, the ways of the world and the ways of God become opposed to each other. But notice in the Gospel reading how the tempter attempts to blend the ways of the world and the ways of God, how he tries to convince Jesus that they are really the same. He doesn’t try to convince Jesus to do obviously evil things. He tries to persuade him to do things that would be good on their own in another context, or that could be the means to a good end. Turn these stones to bread. Feed yourself, and all those hungry people out there. That’s what Moses did! That’s what God would want you to do. Use your power! The temptation here (besides taking things into his own hands) is to believe the worldly promise that satisfying all our natural desires is the way to a happy and meaningful life. When Jesus says there’s more to life than that, the tempter sees and opening, and then tries to tempt him to a display of Piety. He uses the Bible to suggest that Jesus prove himself as God’s agent in a public display at the temple. Jump off the top of the temple. God will catch you. People will be impressed. Jesus sees that this is an attempt to turn the tables on God, to put God to the test rather than undergoing the test that the Spirit had led him to.

The final temptation is to rule the nations in the way that the world rules – through coercion, violence, exploitation, and fear. Earthly power will get you what you want. Take it! This is what Jesus’ disciples believed he had come for, and it has been a temptation for the church ever since, to use worldly power in God’s name.

Jesus opts to use his power in a different way. He tells the tempter to go away. And he does. And the next thing that Jesus does, after our reading ends, is to begin proclaiming that the kingdom of Heaven has come near. God’s kingdom is coming. And on the way it is casting out all the forces that seek to oppose and undermine God, and it will change the way we do things.

Jesus’ threefold temptation is a helpful tool for our Lenten discipline. It can be used to help us diagnose our place in the cosmic battle between good and evil, between God and all the forces that rebel against God, including our very selves. And it comes with the assurance that the difficult work of diagnosis, and the even more difficult work of struggling against sin and evil, are blessed endeavors, initiated and empowered by the Holy Spirit poured out upon us in Holy Baptism. They are rooted in the promise that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are undoing the damage that we have done and continue to do through our misguided attempts to play God in our own lives and the lives of others, that God in Jesus is reclaiming our fallen creation and is working to make all things new. May that same Spirit, then, who led Jesus into the wilderness, lead us now in this holy Lenten season, giving us courage to face the reality of our sinfulness, the perseverance to struggle against sin, and the faith to trust his promises. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.