

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

We pray every week for the natural world, and I know that Faith Circle dug into our relationship with nature this past week in its Bible study and contemplated praying not only for but with creation. I'm going to complicate that idea for you a little bit right now because there is a reality about nature that I want to draw on for reasons I hope will become clear. There is a fungus called *Ophiocordyceps* that has evolved to infect carpenter ants and to use them for its own purposes. Those of you who watch programs like *Nova* might have heard of this. This fungus is able to hijack the brain of an ant, and then makes it climb up a nearby plant and lock its jaws to the bottom of a leaf. The ant then dies, but the fungus continues to grow in the ant until it bursts its body open and rains down spores on other ants below, to continue the cycle. I bring up this horrifying little vignette from the natural world because I think it vividly illustrates the nature of what the devil is up to in today's Gospel reading, and what the serpent is also doing in the garden with the woman and the man. But it's an exaggerated comparison, I'll grant. Sin doesn't completely take us over like a zombie ant fungus. But it does infect us, in a sense, and try to coopt us, to direct us away from our God-given purpose and to hijack us for its own ungodly agenda.

Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is a story we skipped over three weeks ago because it fits so well thematically with the beginning of Lent. But chronologically it belongs right after the baptism of Jesus. And what happened there is key to understanding our text today. You'll remember that as Jesus came up out of the water after his baptism, a voice from heaven declared him to be God's Son. And that got repeated for us last week from the cloud during Jesus' Transfiguration. So, it is Jesus' baptismal identity that is up for discussion today. "If you are the Son of God," the devil repeats three times. It could also be translated "since you are the Son of God," because the devil is not trying to deny that identity, or to get Jesus to question it. What he is trying to do is coopt it, to redefine on his own terms what it means to be the Son of God. With each temptation he is trying to get Jesus to work against God by making it seem like it's something God would want him to do. "Take care of yourself." "Trust God's angels." "Use a little deceit and coercive power to do good." Cooption is more insidious than outright opposition because it seems reasonable. It's the same tactic used by the serpent in the garden in our first reading, who doesn't confront or contradict God directly, but confuses, misinforms, and redirects the humans away from God's intentions.

What makes this more than simply a story about Jesus' remarkable willpower is what lies underneath it. These three temptations after 40 days of fasting intentionally echo three inflection points in the 40-year journey of the People of Israel in the wilderness after the Exodus. The first was doubting that God would provide for them, which led to God sending manna to feed them. The second was doubting that God would stick with them, which Deuteronomy later criticized as "testing God." And the third was turning to other gods, which you'll remember from the golden calf story. And where Israel failed at every point, Jesus remains faithful. Out of all the other Gospel writers, Matthew does the most to connect Jesus to Israel's past story, to portray him as the new Israel, from the flight to Egypt, the massacre of the male infants, and his passing through the Jordan at his baptism to his teaching about the law in his Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is rewinding and replaying Israel's story, reembodying it in his own life story. Only this time he does what the Children of Israel were not able to do. He remains faithful to his identity and to his mission. And he does so on God's terms; not his own, not the devil's, not the world's.

Hold onto this idea, because the temptation doesn't end with the devil's departure in this story. These temptations never go away, and they return in full force in the readings for Holy Week. For now, let's turn to how all of this connects with us in the here and now. As we begin these 40 days of Lent, there is a temptation to think that this season is about reenacting Jesus' story in our own lives, however trivially: giving up chocolate, or alcohol, or social media, for example. And if you're doing something like that as part of your Lenten discipline, let me be clear: good for you. Do it, and stick with it. You have my blessing, not that you need it. But maybe think about it in a different way. Don't think of it as something you are going to achieve or succeed at. Think of it as a tool to recognize that you are not able, and often not even willing, to live as God created you to live, to love God with your whole heart and mind and soul, and your neighbor as yourself. Think about how hard it is to accomplish even a trivial Lenten discipline. And if you fail, there's an object lesson for you. But don't give up. Start again. But keep your eye not on your own success or failure, but on God's ongoing faithfulness to you in Jesus. And then think about your own identity, by which I mean your baptismal identity, who God has declared you do be: a forgiven, redeemed, and beloved child of God. And then notice the temptations to redefine that identity on your own terms, or on the world's terms. Notice the attempts to combine your baptismal identity with your racial and ethnic identity, or your economic status. Notice the temptation to redefine who counts as a neighbor, or to sort neighbors in those who are "deserving" of your concern and those who aren't. Notice the appeal to fear those who are different from you, instead of welcoming and caring for the stranger in your midst. And notice the appeal to coercive power, especially the temptation to do a little evil in the service of good. You don't have to try very hard. Of course there is the easy example of Christian Nationalism that has reared its ugly head again of late. But that's kind of a straw man for most of us that we can pat ourselves on the back for resisting. "Well done us!" But there are other ways in which our identity is coopted, for instance the temptation to believe that our real national religions of Capitalism and Militarism are not false gods and can coexist comfortably with our Christianity. There is the temptation to miss how our responsibility to care for our own children ends up getting weaponized against other people's children, and segregating us into good neighborhoods with good schools. And there is of course the temptation to defer to wealthy and powerful people, fantasizing that the "good life" they model might one day be ours, you know, if that lottery ticket finally hits the jackpot. But we are finally, in recent weeks and months, getting a glimpse of the brutal reality lurking in the lifestyles the rich and famous. So do be careful what you wish for, and whom you worship.

Lent is about recognizing that is where we are, and that we cannot fix what is wrong with the world or even with our own lives. We are indeed captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. But we are also not abandoned to this painful reality. What we cannot fix, God in Jesus can, and will. Jesus's baptismal identity that will take him to the cross will remain intact. It will not be coopted by the devil and all his empty promises. And it will carry us, who are baptized into his death and resurrection, through death to new life. Our death and resurrection begin right now, on this side of the grave, with death to sin and resurrection to lives that trust God and care for others. And as we travel through the wilderness of this life, we rely on the bread of heaven, Jesus himself, whom we continue to feed on in our weekly gatherings around word and sacrament, affirming our God-given identity as God's beloved children, and continually fighting back the infection of sin that keeps trying to take over. May we rely on that precious manna from heaven, and trust in God's redeeming and recreating work on our behalf throughout this season of Lent and beyond. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto live everlasting. Amen.