

## **A Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent, March 5, 2006**

*The Rev'd Stephen C. Scarlett*

“Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (from the Epistle 2 Corinthians 6:1f.)

As we look at the gospel—the forty days Jesus spent fasting and being tested in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1f.)—we should pay particular attention to the first line. “Then was Jesus led up [by] the Spirit to be tempted by the devil.” To say that Jesus was led into temptation by the Spirit is to say that the whole event was directed and ordained by God.

Biblically, a temptation is essentially a test that reveals what is in the heart. The Spirit did not lead Jesus into the test so that he might somehow fail. The Spirit led Jesus into the test in order that we might see who Jesus is through the results of the test. We might think that a certain person is unusually brilliant, but we can never know exactly how brilliant that person is until his intelligence is tested. An IQ test result of, say, 190 reveals the level of intelligence. We believe that Jesus is the perfect Man. The results of the test in the wilderness reveal that this is so.

Hebrews tells us that Jesus “in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (4:15). The wilderness temptations highlight this distinction. We struggle against sin and temptation and on occasion we fall. Sin besets us and we experience victory over it, by grace, in a protracted conflict over time. Jesus had no struggle, no temptation that really tempted him, no sin that beset him. He was tempted as we are, yet without sin.

Today’s gospel is meant to be read in contrast with another Bible scene where Satan tempts. God also led the first humans to be tempted by the devil. Serpent and tree tested Adam and Eve to see how strong was their faith in and love for God. As we all know, they failed the test.

Genesis 3 describes the failure:

The serpent said to the woman, "You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate.

Here is the pattern of fallen humanity. First, God’s law is known. Second there is a demonically inspired questioning of the validity of God’s law or of its being applicable to “my” situation. Third, there is fantasizing of the positive results to be gained from disobedience and consequent strong desire to do the forbidden thing. Finally, there is the act of sin.

The epistle of James describes how we imitate this pattern: “Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire, when it has conceived, gives birth to sin and sin, when it is full grown, brings forth death” (1:14-15).

In the wilderness, Jesus shows us the new and better way. As in the garden, the tempter presents him with temptations and the offer of reward. But Jesus does not flinch. There was no inner dialogue about the pros and cons of the offer. There was, instead, the immediate and firm statement of the teaching from God's word that is applicable to each temptation.

Jesus calls us to learn this new pattern of behavior. The old pattern of temptation, sin, guilt, shame, fear and death is natural to us. But Jesus has planted the Holy Spirit in our hearts. There is, within each Christian who puts his trust in the Son of God, the wisdom and strength that are needed to remain faithful under trial.

1 Peter describes the new pattern of response to testing for those who live "in Christ":

Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experience of suffering is required of your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish, and strengthen you (1 Peter 5:8-10).

Note the themes in common with Jesus in the wilderness. The devil tests us as he tested Jesus. We must firmly resist. The temptation will last only for a period of time. And afterwards, we will be strengthened—angels will come and minister to us!

Each Christian has wilderness times of testing when circumstances and Satan conspire to press hard upon us and test our faith. Lent is a time when the Spirit leads the whole church into the wilderness. It is a time when the Holy Spirit leads us to voluntarily strip away some of life's comforts and intensify our lives of prayer in order to subdue our misdirected desires, detach our selves from the world and, armed with the armor of God, do battle with the principalities and powers.

The goal of Lent is that we might be tested to see where we are in the faith. We never know how strongly attached we are to things until we try to go without them for a while. When we find out how strongly attached we are we can, by prayer and fasting, begin to develop greater self-control. We can, by greater devotion to the Scriptures, more readily expose and resist the demonic lies. We can, by doing good works, grow in love.

Lent is an opportunity to make a good confession and break free of the old pattern of the Fall. Lent is the opportunity to pursue new avenues of grace and grow in our imitation of Christ in his wilderness victory.

"Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation"