

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel on the First Sunday in Lent, March 13, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

### **Jesus in the Wilderness**

You can tell that Lent is here because the Scripture reading for today calls us to consider the very familiar story about the tempting of Jesus by the devil in the desert. (Matthew 4:1-11)

Lent started this past Wednesday. For the next thirty six days (as we prepare for Easter), Christian people all over the world will be asked to take a good hard look at ourselves—to engage in a practical, realistic evaluation of our frequent failings as human beings...the way we too often talk the talk without walking the walk. We are asked to take stock of how far all of us fall short of the ideals that we espouse. The basic purpose is not to punish ourselves or get all depressed about failures but, rather, to appreciate anew how amazing it is that God loves and forgives us—even as poorly as we measure up to what we COULD do and be.

Surely even the most Pollyannaish individual on this planet would have to admit that individually and corporately we human beings are pretty messy. From personal lives of crime, drugs, and spouse abuse to international violence, global pollution, and genocide our track record just isn't all that great. Sure, I know that we're also capable of great generosity and compassion. The bottom line is not completely negative and pessimistic. But, the point is, we human beings are not, as people of earlier days in these United States used to say, "Every day in every way, getting better and better."

The plain truth of the matter is that each of us, no matter how ethical and morally determined, is subject to all sorts of pressures and attractions that distract us from authentic living. Being pulled "off-agenda" by inner hungers is just part of being human. People used to think of these urgings as "temptations" that came from outside ourselves—from the devil—but, more likely these days, they are seen as originating in our own hearts and minds, basic psychological urges. In any case, the idea of Lent is that we can learn from past experiences through disciplined reflection and recognize such "pulls" as negative urges that we need to face and seek to overcome. That struggle is as old as mankind. Our self-centeredness and our need to "succeed", to dominate rather than to cooperate with and affirm others, remains THE perennial human problem.

There are, of course, all sorts of self-help ideas and resources that people have come up with to help us become the best human beings that we can be. The Power of Positive thinking, the Moral Rearmament movement, and Ethical Culturists have all sought to free us from our basic human proclivities toward harming ourselves and our fellow man because of our personal self-centeredness. The problem continues to be that the harder we try to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, the worse our condition seems to get. Our revulsion in the face of our own selfishness leads us to adopt all sorts of puritanical practices to restrain or restrict our bad behaviors—most of which efforts fail. At the end of the day though we may have seemed to gain some self-improvement, we are led to an even worse state of being—namely attitudes of con-

descending smug self-righteousness in which we think we're SO much better than "all those other poor slobs."

The specifically religious aspect of Lent is that people of Faith recognize that good intentions, stiff upper lip, and rigorous self-discipline will never be enough to win the struggle. Instead, we hold that, in addition to human willpower, we need to turn to the grace of God. Christians of whatever brand would agree that our separation from the ideals of health, happiness, harmony, and peace can only be overcome through the power of God in our lives.

Whether you think that temptations come from the devil or from the darker recesses of your own mind, it's interesting to reflect on the story of the temptations of Jesus. There are some basic truths, I think, in this fascinating biblical account that might help us think about our own experience with temptations as we observe this Lent 2011. There are, it seems to me, several general observations worth noting in the more detailed account—Luke's story of the wilderness temptations of Jesus: The first thing I'd ask you to consider is the **timing**. Jesus is in a weak and vulnerable state. He's been fasting. He's tired, hungry and isolated. The second thing I would call to your attention is the **context**. Jesus is preparing himself for a very tough job, one that he knows will involve controversy, turmoil, and suffering. The situation is one of confrontation and resistance. Then, finally, there is the sheer magnitude of the **objective to be achieved**. I think we would all agree that the eternal salvation of all mankind is a pretty substantial goal. It was this great outcome that Jesus was pursuing and he desperately wanted to be successful so to be offered a guaranteed outcome had to be very tempting, indeed.

Let's recall what is going on in this story of the devil tempting Jesus. Whether you understand that story in a literal, historical sense or in a symbolic metaphorical sense, it seems to me that what we can learn from it remains the same. There are three basic facts about the nature of temptations that are revealed in this one Bible story:

***Temptations are strongest*** when we are at a weak and vulnerable place in our own lives.

***Temptations are strongest*** when the events and circumstances surrounding us are pressing in and threatening to overwhelm us.

***Temptations are strongest*** when the stakes are highest, when the cost and the promises of our decisions make it tough to resist taking the easiest path.

Jesus is physically depleted. The political and religious climate is all working against him. The sense of mission and purpose for his life are driving him to find a way to succeed. In short, all the factors that lead to a person "caving in" to temptation are at their height. So, we could easily understand if Jesus were to take the seemingly "easy way out" by taking the devil up on his offer. He could win approval and support from the crowds by engaging in cheap theatrical magic tricks like turning stones into bread. He could jump off a building and show the whole world that angels would swoop in to save him. He could exchange his soul for complete power and authority over the world. ***Jesus could, according to the devil, choose a "sure thing" and it would all be SO easy.***

Well, the amazing thing is that Jesus, even in a weakened physical state, with clouds of political controversy raging all around, and in spite of his need to succeed as God's chosen messenger is able to see these easy way outs as nothing but illusion, deception, and falsehood. He rejects the apparently easy way and, from that point on, becomes the authentic human being that we all recognize as having an eternal claim to our respect and service. His living example stands forever as the proof that, however difficult, with God nothing is impossible. Jesus asks for and receives the grace and strength that God alone provides.

Here we have the whole point of Lent. It is a time of self-examination and preparation in which we recognize our own shortcomings precisely so that we may learn to trust and to call upon the grace of God. That power alone is able to carry us through the temptations of our own lives—temptations to take what may seem like easy ways and shortcuts.

Think in the next forty days about your own personal mission in life. What is it that God is calling you to do and to be? What are the temptations that threaten to lead you not to embrace the challenges and opportunities of that authentic vocation? What are the seemingly easy way outs that will distract and deflect you from your goal? Is there any way you can negotiate the rapids that lay ahead, relying solely on your own strength?

What Lent is all about is a **promise**—a promise that if you will step forward in Faith, God will be there to meet you with power. No temptation is too strong to overcome IF you are surrounded and strengthened by God's own loving presence. Lent is a time to pray for exactly that gift. ***The promise is that, if you ask, you will receive.***