

Sermon for Lent I

(Genesis 9:8-17; I Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-13)

The Reverend Christopher Worthley
The Church of the Epiphany
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+ In the name of the Blessed Trinity, One God. Amen.

When I was a young boy, I loved to pour over the illustrated Children's Bible my family kept – somewhat unceremoniously – on top of our living room humidifier. Flipping through all of those familiar pages and seeing so many important stories of the Bible illustrated in colorful detail helped bring the Scriptures to life for me, guided me in envisioning how things might have looked at Creation, at the time of the Flood and, of course, during the life of Jesus.

Strangely, one of the images that got stuck in my head – and has stayed there pretty much ever since – was a picture of Satan, the great “accuser,” whisking Jesus up to the top of a mountain during the Temptation in the desert wilderness and offering to give him all the kingdoms of the world, if Jesus would only fall down and worship him. I remember being a bit confused by this picture. There was Satan just as any child – or adult for that matter – might imagine him: Red, to start with, a bit wicked looking, horned, of course, and wearing a cape for some reason. And there was Jesus looking holy, gentle and determined. Satan seemed to be flying and pointing; Jesus was listening and watching on top of the mountain. As I recall, my youthful response to this strange, illustrated encounter was something akin to admiration: Even though you wouldn't think they would, these two are actually getting along amazingly well; they were being very polite. (Politeness, you see, was highly regarded in my family.)

So here we are on the First Sunday of Lent, the 40-day period during which we fast and pray to commemorate Jesus' own 40 days in the desert, his own fasting and his

temptation in the company of Satan. And yet: Where are all the stories about the competitive – but, of course, largely polite – discussion between Jesus and Satan? Where’s the part where the very hungry Jesus answers Satan’s call to turn stones to bread with that inspired retort, “man does not live by bread alone”? And where is that strange image of Jesus and Satan on the great mountain, surveying all the glorious kingdoms of the world?

Well we don’t get these today. Mark’s account of Jesus’ Baptism and Temptation in the wilderness is devoid of the colorful imagery and great dialogue described by Matthew and Luke. All the main players are there, of course: John the Baptist, Jesus, Satan and even a few wild beasts and angels. But Mark’s Gospel – generally regarded as the first canonical Gospel written – gives us just the barest facts, as he sees them, with very few flourishes.

Just the facts: Jesus is baptized by John; Jesus sees the Holy Spirit descend upon him – upon himself – like a dove, and Jesus hears the voice of God declare him the beloved Son. The Spirit that just descended then immediately drives Jesus into the arid, hilly, rocky desert of Judea, where Jesus stays for forty days, is tempted by Satan, is with the wild beasts and is waited upon by angels. That’s it. After his very, very short account of the Temptation, Mark then shows Jesus beginning his ministry of preaching and healing in Galilee.

Now as a young person, this truly would not have done it for me. I liked that rich imagery in Matthew’s and Luke’s accounts of the Temptation. I liked those pictures of Jesus and Satan debating in the desert and on the mountaintop.

But now I think there is a certain profound richness in Mark’s streamlined approach to this story. In Mark’s account, Jesus moves very quickly from one part of his life to another; from being who he was to being more fully who God called him, needed him to be. Mark’s Jesus makes an utterly radical life change in two really short paragraphs –

Baptism and Temptation, that's it. After that Jesus begins his far-reaching ministry of preaching and healing in earnest; he changes; he truly becomes who God calls him to be.

I think Mark's approach – getting to the very heart of the matter – can be quite helpful to us as we continue our own journey through the 40 days of Lent. Sometimes, we must focus very hard and very directly on what matters. Sometimes, we only get at the truth when we get rid of distractions.

What is keeping you from being the person God is calling you to be?

What is God calling you to change in your life?

Anyone who has even a nodding acquaintance with 12 step programs – those programs that help people overcome all manner of destructive behaviors – anyone who's heard about such programs probably knows what Step One of those 12 steps is. The first step is... “admit that you have a problem” – or more correctly admit that, on your own, you are powerless to overcome the behavior that is hurting you and those you love.

How about the subsequent steps, though? They're not quite as well known or as frequently cited. What, for example, is Step Four?

Step Four is, I think, closely related to the spirit of Lent. Step Four is to make “a searching and fearless moral inventory” of oneself. What a powerful idea: To make a searching and fearless moral inventory. I cannot think of an action – because this is, of course, about taking action – I cannot think of an action that is more related to what these 40 days of Lent are all about than taking a hard look at who we are and what we do, and how what we do gets in the way of who we are meant to be.

So what is God calling you to change in your life?

In her book, *The Humility of God*, Ilia Delio, a Franciscan sister and religious studies professor here in Washington, talks about an understanding of change – and more

specifically sin – championed in the middle ages by the Franciscan leader, St. Bonaventure. (This, by the way, is the book being explored during Lent at Epiphany’s *Fellowship and Light* series on Wednesday evenings, to which you are all cordially invited.) To put it simply, Bonaventure sees sin not so much as a violation of rules and norms, but rather as “everything that stands in the way of our completion in God.”

Seen from this angle, to sin is to give in to the things that keep us from being who God calls us to be, to give in to the things that demean and devalue our lives and hurt those we love. Seen from this angle, we sin when we fail to love, when we choose to do unloving things toward God, our neighbors and ourselves. Sinning is about not loving enough; it is about choosing not to love.

In contrast, turning away from sin – resisting temptation – is about doing the thing that is most loving in any given situation, hard as that might sometimes be to figure out. Struggling against sin, confronting temptation is therefore not a question of attending to rules and regulations; it’s a matter of figuring out how to love better – how to love God better, how to love other people better, how to love ourselves better.

Now to many people, it can seem comforting to have a straightforward list of “dos” and “don’ts” to guide us in deciding how life should be. But that, I think, places an awful lot of faith in lists, rather than in God. When we ponder what is standing in the way of our relationship with God and with our fellow human beings, our neighbors, we can’t just look down at a list – we must look up to God. How much more fearless we can be in making our moral inventory – identifying what we need to change in our lives – if we do this in partnership with God, if we turn to God through prayer, fasting, meditation, and, most especially, if we take the time to listen to what God is telling us. Of course, actually listening to what God has to say to us about what we need to change is often the hardest part for us.

While I was in seminary, I served for two years as an assistant chaplain in an Episcopal parish school that really would have made a good set for any PBS school story: Gothic

arches, Scottish tartan uniforms, the works. Several mornings a week I conducted chapel for the school community of children in junior kindergarten through sixth grade, all of whom filed into the church each day behind a Crucifer, by class – and thus basically by height.

One week, our chapel theme was prophecy and the many ways in which God speaks to us. One day, I told the story of how the prophet Amos's call for justice was like the Lord roaring from Zion. Another day, I told the students about Elijah's encounter with God in the still, soft voice. Then, at the end of the week, a very gifted and discerning second-grader named Owen came up to me and asked: "Chaplain Christopher, why is it that God sometimes speaks in a soft voice but then sometimes roars like a lion?" Well he had me there. But then it occurred to me to say this: "Owen, I guess God sometimes has to roar loudly because we aren't listening."

This, I think, is what Lent is all about. This is a time for us to focus on what matters, to eliminate distractions, to figure out – with God's help – what we need to change, to listen to what God is telling us in our hearts and minds – and sometimes in our life circumstances.

My sisters and brothers, even if life already feels like enough of a wilderness, it is important that we go into the desert this Lent. It is important that we focus on what matters most, that we take stock and that we listen to what God wants us to change. We must face the demons that distract and discourage us. And whenever we can, we should seek rest with the angels.

May each of us have the courage to change the things we can.

I wish us all a holy and blessed Lent.

Amen.