

Intro

People of God, the church calendar in its different liturgical seasons is designed to help the church re-live the life of Christ in our liturgical life together. When we observe the different liturgical seasons of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost, we are symbolically and ritually re-living the story of Jesus and our redemption. By following the life of Christ in the liturgical seasons, the church is being constantly shaped and molded and fashioned into the image of Christ. And by going through the annual cycles of the story of Jesus together as a church will prove to be transformational in your lives over the years.

Purpose of Lent

What then is the purpose of the Season of Lent in the life of the Church? To answer that question we simply have to follow the story of the Lord of the church in the Gospels.

The Gospel stories are generally divided into two halves. The first half of the gospel is about the early life and early ministry of Jesus – beginning of course with events surrounding his birth, and then fast forwarding to his Baptism, and wilderness temptation, his calling of the disciples, and of course it includes Jesus' ministry of teaching and performing miracles.

Now, the dividing point for the Gospel story comes at the account around the Transfiguration. The transfiguration is the hinge upon which the story of Jesus turns; And here is how it goes. Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ. Jesus then foretells his death and resurrection. Then the very next thing Jesus teaches his disciples is this - *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life my sake and the gospel's will save it."*

And then comes the account of the transfiguration, signifying the glory that is to come when Jesus does rise from the dead.

Every year in our liturgical life, Lent begins on the Wednesday after Feast of the Transfiguration. And every Sunday thereafter there are themes in the Gospels that emphasize repentance, faith, fasting, praying, resisting temptation, and the like, because symbolically, we are preparing to go the cross with Jesus. We are learning what it means to carry our cross, and give up our lives, so that we might gain them.

But like Jesus, we cannot gain our lives and rise from the dead in glory unless we first carry our crosses and deny ourselves. We cannot have the hope of resurrection glory if we do not follow the Son of Man in His way of discipleship, and deny ourselves and carry our crosses. We must be willing to lose our lives for the Lord if we are going to receive them back again from the Lord. Lent therefore is the liturgical season that helps bring these often-neglected themes back into focus.

But notice that on the first Sunday in Lent, the lectionary jumps back in time and out of the order of the story to Jesus' temptation in the wilderness by the Devil. Why does it do this? It does this because the lectionary is trying address theological themes that are necessary and helpful for us to make our way toward the cross on Good Friday, so that we can have an Easter of unending Joy. So we can learn how to carry our cross daily, and learn of the pitfalls and traps that so easily ensnare us along the way. And so, we need to begin with a lesson about temptation.

Because here I believe the church was wise enough to know the hard truth and reality of spiritual life. What the church is trying to teach us in the lesson of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is this: during times of increased devotion to God, like during Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, and like the 40 days of Lent, there will come times of increased temptation.

Romans 7:21 says, *"So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand."* When its time to obey, when it is time to crucify the lusts of

the flesh, when it is time to lay down my concern for other things and give myself over to prayer, it is then, at that moment that sin and temptation rise up to knock me off course. When it is time to carry your cross, then the Devil will come and sit down on your shoulder to convince you to put it down. But it is not the Devil who is even technically tempting you. James says that each person is tempted when they are enticed and lured away by their own desires. The real temptation comes from within you.

The temptation of Jesus in the Wilderness is itself typical of the same kinds of temptations that we face today and have faced from the very beginning. And so, it is important for us to know what these temptations are and where they come from that would knock us off course and prevent us from persevering to the end and prevent us from our resurrection glory.

That is the purpose of the lectionary readings jumping back to Jesus' temptation in the wilderness.

3 Temptations

The three temptations that the Devil poses to Jesus in the wilderness are eerily similar to how Eve was tempted by the Devil in the Garden. And the three temptations roughly correspond to the Lust of the Flesh, the Lust of the Eyes, and the Pride of Life. These are archetypal temptations that we all experience.

Let's briefly look at these, comparing the accounts of the temptations in the garden and in the wilderness.

First comes the Lust of the Flesh

And here the chief desire is for comfort and pleasure.

Satan comes to Eve in the Garden bringing an Accusation against God's goodness, and thus plants a seed of doubt in her mind, that says, "Maybe God really doesn't want me to be happy and to experience pleasure."

Notice, he comes to her with a negative, saying, “Did God really say you SHALL NOT eat of the tree in the garden?” But that is only a partial truth. God didn’t say that. What God actually said was, “You MAY eat of every tree of the Garden. But the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil you shall not eat.” God gives us all manners of options for pleasure and satisfaction, which are free for the taking. But Satan draws our attention toward that one thing that is prohibited, and then makes it seem like God is not good because of this prohibition.

He says, “ You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it you will be like God knowing good and evil.” And now he baits the traps with a desire that Eve has. You see, Adam and Eve, and we ourselves, were created to be like God. God knows the best way to make us like him. But the Devil deceives Eve and makes her begin to think that she can have the good thing that God promised by acquiring it through ways God forbade.

And now notice here, it says “So when the woman saw the fruit was good for food – Lust of the Flesh; And that it was a delight to the eyes; Lust of the Eyes; And was to be desired to make one wise; The Pride of Life – she took of its fruit and ate, and she gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened and they knew they were naked.”

This story in Gen. 3 is exactly like what Paul says in Romans 7. The Law of Sin is present when I want to do good. When the commandment comes, sin then rises up with in me, and seizing opportunity through the commandment, sin produces in me the desire to have the thing that God says ‘No’ to. And sin brings forth death.

Now let us see how this is played out in Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. Just as Eve saw that the Fruit was good for food, Satan tries to tempt Jesus here with food. Just like how original man was created hungry, so too was Jesus hungry. Adam and Eve had a whole garden to choose from. But that

Garden has now turned into a wilderness because of Adam and Eve were deceived by their own desires, and thus gave into to temptation. And all Jesus has now is stones. So where is Jesus going to get the necessary food to sustain him? He has just fasted for 40 days. Where is he going to find food to keep him alive?

As you know, People of God, when you are hungry, you are physically weak, emotionally vulnerable, and mentally tired as well. Your body has this built in desire for food, and God has also given us the ability to receive pleasure from eating. But this temptation for food here is more than just a desire for food. It refers to the Lusts of the flesh as a whole. It refers to man's built-in desire for all kinds of physical pleasure. And ultimately it manifests itself as a desire to do something in the body.

God created your body to experience pleasure. But Satan plays on our desires for physical pleasure, and makes us focus on that one particular thing that God is withholding from us, and he uses our desires to tempt us, making us think that God is actually keeping something from us that is good. But this is a lie. And we need to understand that this is lie when those desires kick in to have that kind of pleasure that God says is forbidden for you. He is not cutting of all pleasure, he is only cutting off the pleasure that will kill you. Remember that.

So the Devil says to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread." And Jesus answered him, "It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone." The antidote to the Lust of the flesh, is the Word of God. "It is written, You shall not live by bread alone." Obedience to the word of God is more life giving than gratifying your physical desires through sinful means. Jesus would have rather starved to death, entrusting himself to God in His suffering and obedience and faith, then ease the burden of the temptation by giving into the temptation and not trust God to provide for him.

The Second Temptation we see here is the Lust of the Eyes. Gen. 3 Eve saw that the fruit was a Delight to the Eyes. I think this has to do with covetousness.

Eve wanted to have something that looked good. And I think this is a very human response. We all want nice things. Some of us want a new truck - Devon. These things are nice to look at, and when we have new nice things, we feel better about ourselves for some reason. That is why some people, when they are feeling bad, they go shopping to make themselves feel better. They now have something that looks nice, and so now they feel better.

But there is also this sense where we feel like if we don't have the thing than we are somehow less. We are missing something. And that is how marketers make their money. We are constantly bombarded with advertisements telling us to look to something else to make us feel complete. But this is precisely why St. John links Covetousness to idolatry. The thing we covet, which we feel we can't live without, becomes a false god. We look to the thing for self-fulfillment, and completion, and happiness, because we believed the lie that told us we are not everything we could be if we didn't have this thing.

Now notice the temptation as it is presented to Jesus. The Devil took Jesus up to a high mountain and "showed him" - Lust of the eyes - all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time and said, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whoever I will. If you will worship me, it will all be yours." Thus, the temptation here is to have something.

The Devil knows what he is doing here. He shows the kingdoms to Jesus, so he can see with his eyes that they are a delight. And we already know that Jesus has the desire with him to inherit all the nations and their authority and glory, because the Son of Man was promised all the kingdoms of the world and their authority and glory in Dan. 7. This is not a bad

desire. But Jesus was tempted to have the kingdoms of the world through idolatry, and not through worshipful obedience to God and his way.

And how do we fall into similar temptations. We desire to have all sorts of things, things maybe even that God says are good in their time. But when you short cut the plan, and you are tempted to receive the proverbial kingdom through disobedience to God, you are worshiping the Devil. You might desire to have land, or wealth, or a good reputation, or influence, or get married, or have security or have more time. And when you desire to have things, the temptation always arises to get it as fast as possible and with the least amount of difficulty.

But the antidote to the Lust of the Eyes is to Worship God alone. If you have a desire to have something good, how will you acquire it? And for what purposes? Jesus did not receive the kingdom through the relative ease of worshiping the Devil and by by-passing all the suffering and cross bearing and self imposed death that is necessary to receive the kingdom. And neither can you.

In other words, you cannot be conformed to Christ's likeness if you avoid carrying your cross. A spirituality which seeks the way of least resistance is not always the best route to acquiring what God has to give you. So keep that in mind. When you are tempted, it will come from the desire within you to have something good, and to have it now. But you must resist, and worship the Lord God alone, and wait for him to give it to you in due time.

And the third temptation that comes to us is Pride of Life. In Genesis 3 Eve saw that the fruit of the tree was to be Desired to Make one wise. Wisdom in the Bible is the necessary thing to have in order to rule. Eve was going to be like God, knowing good and evil, and she was going to wield her rule and control over all. Like Galadriel who was tempted with the Ring of Power when Frodo was going to give it to her. She said:

And now at last it comes. You will give me the Ring freely! In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the Mountain! Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair!"

People love to have control. Control over things, over people, over programs, and institutions, and nations. But the thing that people most want control over is God. Eve's desire is to be wise, and to rule the world and control all things. She has delusions of grandeur. She can be like God, and possibly, with the serpent's help, maybe even control God himself. All will love her and despair.

This is exactly the kind of presumption that the Devil tries to tempt Jesus with. He took him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,

"He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you."

And, "On their hands they will bear you up lest your strike your foot against a stone."

But Christ quotes Deut. 6:16, "It is written, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." Now Jesus does not actually finish the verse, but I think we can infer some meaning here from the rest of the verse, for it gives us context. It says, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massa."

The event at Massa happened in Exodus 17, where the people of God grumbled because they had no water. But it isn't just the fact that they had no water. The issue was the fact that they were testing God to see whether he was among them or not.

You see, what they were doing was making demands upon God, and forcing him to prove himself. But this is actually a desire to control God. It is one thing to call upon God in faith and to ask God to do something, while understanding that God has the prerogative to say yes or no. But it is quite another to call upon God and make demands of him as though he were like the Genie in Aladdin. As if you were the master and God were the slave. But such presumption really is a lack of faith, not the evidence of it.

Just like those health, wealth, and prosperity heretics, who turn faith into a magical substance, and that they can then use to manipulate God himself into doing their bidding. They are like Simon the Magician who sought to plant the seed of faith in giving the apostles money in order to have the power to give the Holy Spirit to whom ever he laid hands on. Simon the Magician wanted to control God.

I suppose the most realistic example of this would be engaging in sin because we know God forgives sin. Giving yourself over to sin, and having a heart posture toward God that says, “Well you said you’d forgive me. So do it.” People of God, you should be absolutely terrified of sinning. You should rather choose death than to sin against the Lord God Almighty. But because he is a God who is merciful and gracious and slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and kindness, we take God’s grace for granted and we give ourselves over to sin, thus forcing God’s hand. We put ourselves in the position of controlling God. And this is truly the most pompous display of the pride of life.

Conclusion

People of God, during this season of Lent, and through all your days, please understand the nature of these temptations and where they come from. They come from within you, when you are lured and enticed by the desires of your own heart. Your desire to have, your desire to be, and your desire

to control – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and pride of life – these are what will trip you up when you are carrying your cross.

Whenever you are ready to do good, and seek God, expect at least these three desires to rise up in your heart and mind to pull you away from obedience, and to fill your heart and mind with all kinds of justifications for why doing such and such a sin will be ok. But you must follow the example of Christ our Lord and Master, who went to the word of God, and read it, and quoted it out loud, and believed it, and obeyed it. And only in this way are we properly resisting the Devil and forcing him to flee from us. May God grant us the strength to carry our crosses daily, as we profess Jesus to be the Christ, and hope in him for the glory of deliverance and resurrection. Amen.