

Understanding Temptation [*Comprensión de la Tentación*]

Que las palabras de mi boca y la meditación de nuestro corazón sean aceptables ante tus ojos, oh Señor, mi roca y mi salvación. Amén. [Salmos 19:14]

This is the First Sunday in Lent, a 40-day period of fasting and penitence beginning on Ash Wednesday, observed by many Christians in preparation for Easter. One of the commentaries I read in preparing today's sermon described Lent as "the season for the experience of giving your life over – in each moment, bodily, deliberately – to Christ and to what the Spirit is showing you." It suggested that God wants us to surrender ourselves and let the Spirit work in us. During Lent, "we take responsibility for our acts and thoughts;" including those that are sinful and destructive to our spirit. It further described Lent as a "self-discovery of the parts of ourselves we don't want to discover, through prayer, fasting, and other disciplines," an "opening up [and] turning over to God, the repenting of our sins, and the turning away from that which does not please God;" while we glimpse at Easter "through the heavy clouds of Good Friday;" to a place where "Christ has taken the burden, and [we] don't have to carry it anymore."

So, since Lent is about preparing one's self for Easter, including self-examination, it is appropriate that all of today's lessons for this First Sunday in Lent focus on understanding and overcoming sin as we begin our Lenten journey. Our Old Testament Lesson from Genesis is the familiar story of the Garden of Eden, the first sin, and its punishment. Psalm 32, Thanksgiving for healing, describes sin as a *disease*, for which healing is the evidence that the transgression is forgiven. However, the healing can only come after our acknowledgment of the sin. In our lesson from Romans, as one commentator put it, St. Paul declares that because of God, our lives are not hopeless. And, that while sin and death may have come into the world through one man: Adam, by the grace of Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection, we have been pardoned, our sins are forgiven, we have received the gift of new life, and we have been made righteous as we stand before God. Our lesson from Matthew's Gospel describes Jesus's temptation at the hands of the devil. In today's Collect, we pray that through Jesus, we will find God – who knows all of our weaknesses and that we are assaulted daily by many temptations – mighty to save.

I would suggest that in order to overcome sin, we must first understand sin. The same commentator suggested that there are three kinds of temptations in the world that correspond with the nature of humankind: temptations of the body, temptations of the soul, and temptations of the spirit.

We have a body; and according to the commentator, temptations of the body deal with those fleshly desires that don't honor God, but simply gratify the evil passions of our flesh.

We have a soul; and according to the commentator, temptations of the soul deal with our will – our ability to make choices and decisions, and are designed to lead us away from God’s will. Those temptations provide us the opportunity to make decisions, and if we make the wrong decision, it is because we based it on our own will and chose to walk by sight, not by faith in God’s Word.

And, we have a spirit; and according to the commentator, temptations of the spirit deal with our inner self that is supposed to connect with God and worship Him. These temptations deal with replacing the worship of God with other things. Giving in to temptations of the spirit causes us to have a lack humility and dependence on God. Worshiping the things of and in this world causes us to depend on something other than God; which brings a false sense of joy and satisfaction in this life.

Interestingly enough, our text from Matthew describes the devil’s temptation of Jesus as temptations targeted at Jesus’ body, soul, and spirit.

As we just heard, Matthew’s Gospel records that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and nights and was famished. Because Jesus had just finished a forty-day period of fasting, it is likely that the devil saw Jesus as a ripe target for a temptation of the body. The devil came to Jesus and said, that if he was the Son of God, he should command the stones to become bread. But Jesus resisted this temptation of the body to gratify the passion of the flesh; and instead, he told the devil that “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

Having failed to get Jesus to succumb to temptations of the body, the devil tried a different approach: a temptation targeted a Jesus’ soul; an attempt to get Jesus to make a decision that would led him to away from God’s will, a decision based on his own will instead of God’s Word. So when the devil took Jesus to the holy city, placed him on the pinnacle of the temple and told him, that if you are the Son of God, throw yourself down and God will command his angels to bear you up so that you will not dash your foot against a stone, Jesus told him, as it had been written, “Do not put the Lord God to the test.”

The devil is nothing if not persistent, so he tested Jesus one more time with a temptation of the spirit – our self that is supposed to connect with God and worship Him; temptations that deal with replacing the worship of God with other things; which, according to the commentator, causes us to have a lack humility and dependence on God and instead worship things of and in this world; which brings a false sense of joy and satisfaction in this life. But Jesus did not take the bait. When the devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and offered to give them to him if he would fall down and worship the devil, Jesus sent him away and told him that as it is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only Him.”

So now we have a scriptural basis for understanding sin. And we have heard about how Jesus resisted temptation and overcame sin. But we are just mere mortals. How can we overcome sin? Another commentator I read suggested a three-step approach: First, name the sin. Second, decide to act against the sin. And, third, receive power over the sin.

In naming the sin, the commentator suggested that “honesty is the precursor to victory.” God already knows, so we have nothing to gain from hiding behind explanations, excuses, and rationalizations. If we do so, we are only fooling ourselves. If we don’t acknowledge our sin, then healing, amending our ways, and receiving forgiveness is not possible. The commentator suggested that confessing our sins awakens a deeper sensitivity in us and places our heart in an honest position before God, and more importantly, before ourselves. More importantly, because while God already knows our sins, we humans are good at deluding ourselves, and if we delude ourselves, we close the door to forgiveness, healing, and redemption.

As a part of the liturgy each Sunday, we confess our sins, ask for forgiveness, and receive absolution. Some people include confession as a part of their daily prayers. Sometimes we need help of a discrete Priest, and in the Episcopal tradition, we have the *Rite of The Reconciliation of a Penitent*, or *confession*. There is a saying in the Episcopal Church about confession: “All may, none must, but some should.” However one does it, it is important to name the sin.

In deciding to act against the sin, we use our God-given power to choose – a force, that according to the commentator: no one, not even Satan himself, can overcome. A spiritual 180-degree turn that begins to lay down new neurological and synaptic pathways in our brains, or as St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians [Ephesians 4:23]: a place where we are “renewed in the spirit of [our] mind.” Acting against the sin demonstrates to us and to God that we are truly repentant and seek to amend our lives.

And, the final step is receiving power over the sin. No matter how honest we are in confessing our sins and no matter how resolved we are to amend our ways, we need power outside of ourselves and beyond our mortal flesh to push back against the power of sin. Simply put, this power is the love of God: The free gift, which is ours for the asking. As St. Paul wrote to the people of Rome [Romans 5:15-16]: “But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man’s trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man’s sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification.”

May God give us the strength to confess our sins, amend our ways, and receive the grace of His power and dominion over sin.

En el nombre del Padre, del Hijo, y del Espíritu Santo, Amén.