

I LENT 2014
SERMON-CHRIST CHURCH PARISH
FATHER CRAIG LOONEY
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Do not put us to the test...we ask God in the words Jesus himself taught us to pray. If we stop to think about it...we get tested all the time. Lent is certainly a time we try to do some spiritual housecleaning. It is also a time when we are particularly vulnerable to attacks by the Devil.

The action in today's Gospel takes place immediately after Jesus was baptized. The Gospel tells us that after his baptism, the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the desert specifically to be tested by the Devil. That sounds a lot like God the Father was setting his own Son up for failure...to be tested at a time when he was the most vulnerable. Just what was the purpose of the test?

Jesus went off by himself into the desert to get himself ready for his public ministry. He knew fully well he had a mission to fulfill. He also knew the people were expecting a Messiah like King David who would lead them in a decisive battle against foreign oppressors. Jesus' mission was to sell people on the idea that his kingdom was not an earthly kingdom. It also was not a kingdom that could be forced on people. His kingdom was in heaven...and the choice to live there or not was ours.

Satan is called by many names. He is our accuser; he is the slanderer; he is our adversary, he is the Great Deceiver. He knows he can often get to us with very little effort. But the thought he might actually trick Jesus into working against God was an exercise in futility. Jesus allowed himself to be tested to demonstrate for us his full humanity. There is nothing any of us experience in our lives...good or bad...that Jesus hasn't experienced.

Throughout his earthly life Jesus was subjected to many tests. People wanted to proclaim him the new King David. They wanted him to perform magic acts. And in a final act of desperation, on that first Good Friday, the Devil tried to get Jesus to say God had abandoned him and left him to die on the cross. Jesus' ultimate sacrifice on the cross was the demonstration Jesus was fully God...the proof of God's unconditional love for us. God died on the cross so we might live.

Jesus began his own Lent in the desert that would conclude with his execution. The forty days of Lent are our own individual spiritual journeys to the cross. Lent is also our parish's collective liturgical journey. We will hear during our Walk in Jerusalem on Holy Wednesday that Jesus' execution as a common criminal is Divine Reversal; because through it we find our hope and salvation. We see in his death that our sins are forgiven...once and for all...and that there is life beyond the grave.

What we learn from the time Jesus spent in the desert and from his being tested is how not to give in to our own temptations. Jesus had been without food for a very long time. The Devil seized the moment when Jesus was the most vulnerable to try to trick him. But Jesus told the Devil he had had enough of his nonsense and to take a hike.

Lent is about our spiritual renewal and that means we have to be honest with ourselves about our specific sins and where we need to make some changes if we take what Jesus has done for us seriously. We say we are sorry for our sins and ask God's forgiveness. We must believe God actually loves us enough to forgive us, and we must never allow ourselves to think that our sins are so terrible even God can't reach us.

Father Henri Nouwen, a Dutch-born Roman Catholic priest, wrote, "There is an awareness of sin that does not lead us to God but to self-preoccupation. Our temptation is to be so impressed by our sins and failings and so overwhelmed by our lack of generosity that we get stuck in a paralyzing guilt. It is a guilt that says: 'I am too sinful to deserve God's mercy.' It is the guilt that that leads to introspection, instead of directing our eyes toward God. It is the guilt that has become an idol and therefore a form of pride."

Lent is about confronting our guilt and getting rid of it so we can move on, renewed and refreshed in knowing we are forgiven. We can't deceive ourselves into thinking the Devil won't test us...he will take every opportunity to derail our plans. That's when we need to put forth some extra effort. That's when we need tell the Devil...the Great Deceiver...his tricks won't work on us...and to get lost!

God did not abandon Jesus in the desert and he doesn't abandon us either. Let's try to make this a good and productive and refreshing Lent so that we can more fully experience the joy of Easter.

