

Lent I (18 February 2024)

“Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him.”

+In the Name of...

Did you look at the bulletin this morning? Specifically, I mean the picture on the front. Satan tempting Jesus. Now, we just heard that Gospel lesson, so we know that picture must be of Jesus and the devil, even if we did not have the caption underneath. But would we still know who was pictured if we had not heard that Gospel lesson and did not have the caption? Likely, even without Satan being pictured in a red suit and with a pitchfork! This picture is in black and white, and I do not see a pitchfork. Then how would we know? Here is the problem: if the devil were so honest about his deceits, they would be easy to resist, wouldn't they? Well, maybe not easy but *easier*. We would

feel like we were making a more-informed decision. It is a bigger challenge to choose something wrong if we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that it is wrong as opposed to just suspecting it is. We hope that we can get off on a technicality, that we were not *completely sure* that it was a sin. Cn. Charles Slagle, the Rector of the Parish I served when I was in seminary, was fond of saying that the devil takes something and makes it appear better than it really is. You may remember a silly example I used in a previous sermon: a couple of Oreos at one sitting is not a sin. A couple of packages at one sitting probably is!

Few things in this world are sinful in and of themselves. In fact, the St. Augustine's Prayer Book lists the condemnation of inanimate objects as sinful as the sin of intemperance, under the broader category of gluttony. Here temperance does not mean teetotalism, but to go no further than what is acceptable, whether we are talking about alcohol or anything else that we humans would be tempted to make the center of our lives. (Commercial

alert: we have just received a new shipment of St. Augustine Prayer Books, available for purchase in the Book Nook in the Parish Hall. I still hold it has the best examination of conscience available, but it contains many useful prayers, not just for Lent but for year around.) But Satan takes those things that can be very good, whether food, money, intimate relations, medicine, electronics, or any number of pastimes and tempts us with them, so that we want to spend all our time with them, to the detriment of work, family, and God. Of course, C. S. Lewis could write the text for a laundry detergent commercial and make it sound like the most beautiful prose this side of Heaven, so allow me to quote from Mere Christianity: “An individual Christian may see fit to give up all sorts of things for special reasons – marriage, or meat, or beer, or the cinema; but the moment he starts saying the things are bad in themselves, or looking down his nose at other people who do use them, he has taken the wrong turning.” (And just in case you think I am barking up the wrong tree here, my copy of

“Mere Christianity is in Wisconsin. I went to the Parish library to borrow a copy, and found that we have several. The inside cover of the first one I picked up indicated that it belonged to one Fr. Charles Osborn. He had underlined this passage in red and wrote “Bravo!” in the margin!)

Our hearts and minds know that we are not ultimately made for this world. In the grand scheme of eternity, the amount of time we spend tarrying on this planet is relatively short. What’s more, because of our fallen nature, we look for ways to escape from this world. A bad day at school, at work, or even with your best mate. In swoops the devil, as if on cue. His plan does not fit into the “one-size-fits-all” category! No, he is much too clever for that; he went to the Burger King school of marketing, “Yes, my fine human friend: you *can* have it your way!” And because his minions have been watching us, they and he know exactly what our weakest point is! And what better time than Lent for them to come swarming after God’s people. We even make it easier than normal

for them to spot us: we mark our foreheads with soot at the beginning of Lent, so he knows who is trying to take their faith seriously.

And oh, has he been successful! I cannot keep track of all the closed churches in the Portland area since my youth. “But, that is a good thing, isn’t it?” says contemporary society. “We are shedding the patriarchy! We are celebrating our liberation!”

Maybe, but we are not getting any happier because of it!

Happiness in America (I am not sure I can understand how one measures something that abstract) continues to go down as assuredly as church attendance, while substance abuse and screen time skyrocket! I think I remember my science teacher saying that nature abhors a vacuum. What’s more, Holy Scripture tells us that if we send Satan packing from our lives but do not fill the void with something else, he will come back with a vengeance. This is why during Lent we are encouraged to replace what we are giving up with something helpful to our spiritual growth. Otherwise, we

have evicted Satan from our dirty house only to make it spotless while he is away and then invite him back to his old, but now sparkling clean, quarters. When we have an empty hole in our lives, Satan will gladly present unto us whatever looks most like it will fit.

But there is good news in all this melancholy: not just *the* Good News, although He is the subject of every sermon after all, but here the good news is that He was tempted just as we are. This Gospel passage is viewed with such high regard, that it is read nearly universally in the Western Church on the First Sunday of Lent. The Jews were expecting a Messiah who would be a political liberator: kick the Roman invaders out and restore the Jewish leadership. Thus, Satan presented as his final offer to Jesus all the Kingdoms of the world. “Just worship me this once,” the evil one must have hissed into his ear, “and all of this will be yours.” Despite being starved and exhausted, Our Lord put the devil in his rightful place. Of course, the offer was ludicrous: Jesus was

already the God of the universe. Offering Him all the Kingdoms of the world would be like trying to convince the President of the United States to give up his position in order to become the mayor of Yacolt!

And really, it is the same for us: like Christ, we know that we are heirs to a Kingdom that is not of this world. Christ's temptations did not end that day in the wilderness, and ours will not end this Lent. St. Paul tells us in his letter to the Hebrews that Christ "was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." (4:15) At our baptism we promised to renounce the temptations of the world the flesh and the devil. By a life filled with prayer and the Sacraments, we too can turn to the Father of Lies and tell him, "Get behind me, Satan!"

+In the Name of...