

SUNDAY LENT 01 YEAR A  
“The Temptations of Jesus”

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A woman back from shopping was showing her husband the expensive dress she had purchased. When he asked her why she bought a dress she did not really need, she replied that she couldn't resist the temptation. Her husband countered with the comment that she should have been like Jesus who when tempted told Satan to get behind him. She replied that she did that, and was told that it looked even better from the back!

Put your relationship with God first, and do God's will with trusting obedience.

The first reading from the book of Genesis reminds us that God had a dream. That dream was a “covenant” relationship of life and love with all of humanity. And so God made a covenant with Adam and Eve, a couple. Then God made a covenant with Noah and his family. The next covenant was with Abraham, a tribe. After that, God made a covenant with Moses that transformed a tribe into a nation.

God's dream, however, was thwarted by sin. Our first parents could not resist the original temptation to be like God. Their sin was to deny, lie and put their trust in their own stubborn self sufficiency.

It is noteworthy that the Greek word *peirazein* means *to test* much more than *to tempt to wrong*. Temptation is not meant to lead us into sin; it is meant to enable us to conquer sin, to make us good, stronger, purer. Temptation is not a penalty, but the glory of being human. It is a test which comes to those whom God wishes to use. Abraham was *tempted* by God (*tested, not tempted to do wrong*).

Despite all the covenants that God made with them, the leaders, kings and Judges of Israel, indeed Israel itself, all fell short. They all succumbed to the temptation to trust in land, royalty and power like the other nations, rather than trust, live out of and enjoy their covenantal relationship with God.

Finally, God sent his son, Jesus, to restore that relationship, to bring about a new creation through a new covenant forged out of his fidelity and obedience to the Father. That is why, after his baptism, Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the desert, the dwelling place of Satan.

As Eve was tested in the first creation (and failed), and as Israel was tested in the desert (and failed), Jesus was tested in this new creation. Jesus was not tempted to do anything wrong; but to be unfaithful to his relationship of trust in God. Therefore, this incident was more the *testing* of Jesus than the tempting of Jesus, as we noted above. Jesus, the true Israel, proved his Son-ship where the old Israel failed. The forty nights recalls Moses' sojourn on Sinai, as Jesus is the new Moses. Jesus' baptism was Jesus' surrender to the Father's will; that surrender, the heart of true Son-ship, is tested three times by Satan.

According to Barclay's commentary on this passage, conflict with Satan is not limited to this passage, but is the underlying aspect of the conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world, which is the plot of the whole Gospel of Matthew. The friction between Jesus and the Jewish leaders throughout the Gospel - already anticipated in the conflict with Herod, the high

priests and the scribes (and even the hesitation of John to baptize Jesus) is actually a clash of kingdoms. Jesus is the representative of the kingdom of God, but Satan also represents a kingdom.

The conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders is a surface dimension of the underlying discord between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. In Matthew's theology, Satan, though defeated, continues to tempt Jesus during his ministry, at the crucifixion, and into the time of the church; Satan is finally abolished at the end time.

Jesus refused to come to terms and compromise with the world. Christianity must not compromise with the world, but rather lift the world to its own level. So Jesus refused bribery, sensationalism and the way of compromise. That choice inevitably meant the cross, but the Cross also meant final victory.

According to J.P. Meier, the temptations have an ecclesial dimension - these temptations are really aimed at the Church, and Jesus has showed the Church how to meet them. The message to the Church is that, as she is beset with hypocrites, miracle-workers, false prophets, and false teachers, she must remember that divine son-ship is not primarily a matter of working wonders but understanding God's will in Scripture and carrying it out in trust and obedience.

The Christian community re-defined messiah-ship in terms of Jesus who went to the cross. Instead of the concept of bread and circuses of the time (the Roman Empire), Matthew's Jesus presents an alternative of what the kingdom of God on earth would be. So we do not have a Jesus who could have done miracles, little help to us mortals who do not have the miracles option, but a Jesus who models for us that to be a child of God is to have a trusting relationship with God that does not ask for miraculous exceptions to the limitations of an authentic life.

Our task is to follow him who is the New Moses, the New Israel, the Prophet, who has come to fulfill all that is and to lead us into realizing the kingdom through relationship. Our Lenten practice is a guide, a way of keeping the commandments, and all about relationship: we are asked to pray to deepen our intimate loving relationship with God. We are asked to fast, to deepen our relationship with ourselves, and we are asked to give alms, as a way of deepening our relationship with others.

The story of John Blanchard and Hollis Maynell, published in one of the Chicken Soup books, illustrates the spirit of fidelity and commitment to relationships to which we are called through the example of Jesus.

Blanchard was a soldier who was intrigued with the notes penciled in the margins of a book he had borrowed from a Florida library. The soft handwriting reflected a thoughtful soul and insightful mind. In the front of the book, he discovered the previous owner's name, Miss Hollis Maynell. With time and effort he located her address. She lived in New York City. He wrote her a letter introducing himself and inviting her to correspond. The next day he was shipped overseas for service in World War II.

During the next year and one month the two grew to know each other through the mail. Each letter was a seed falling on a fertile heart. A romance was budding. Blanchard requested a photograph, but

she refused. She felt that if he really cared, it wouldn't matter what she looked like.

When the day finally came for him to return from Europe, they scheduled their first meeting, 7:00 pm at the Grand Central Station in New York. "You'll recognize me," she wrote, "by the red rose I'll be wearing on my lapel." He was to be holding a book. So at 7:00 pm he was in the station looking for a girl whose heart he loved, but whose face he'd never seen.

A very attractive young woman in a spring-time green suit came toward him, her figure long and slim. He started toward her, entirely forgetting to notice that she was not wearing a rose. As she passed him by, she murmured, "Going my way, sailor?" Almost uncontrollably he made one step closer to her, and then saw Hollis Maynell. She was standing almost directly behind the girl. A woman well past 40, she had graying hair tucked under a worn hat. She was more than plump, her thick-ankled feet thrust into low-heeled shoes. The girl in the green suit was walking quickly away. He felt as though he was split in two, so keen was his desire to follow her, and yet so deep was his longing for the woman whose spirit had truly companioned him and upheld his own. And there she stood.

He made his decision. This would not be love, but it would be something precious, something perhaps even better than love, a friendship for which he had been and must ever be grateful. He squared his shoulders, saluted and held out the book that would identify him to the woman, even though while he introduced himself he felt choked by the bitterness of his disappointment.

The woman's face broadened into a tolerant smile. "I don't know what this is about, son," she answered, "but the young lady in the green suit who just went by, begged me to wear this rose on my coat. And she said if you were to ask me out to dinner, I should tell you that she is waiting for you in the big restaurant across the street. She said it was some kind of test!"

The Eucharist that we celebrate now is a celebration of that new covenant that God has forged with us through the faithful, obedience, sacrificial love of Jesus. Through Word and sacrament, we are forgiven, healed and empowered to go out to be faithful to that covenant, expressing our love for God by our love for all others.

So put your relationship with God first, do God's will with trusting obedience, and be co-creators of a new creation.