

1 Lent February 26, 2023  
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When Jesus Was Led Into Temptation  
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One day, Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them how to pray. In response, Jesus taught them a prayer that is still used in every church service and prayer service to this day. We call it the Lord's Prayer. One of the lines from that prayer asks God to refrain from leading us into temptation and to deliver us from evil. We might wonder if the events from today's Gospel where Jesus was led into the wilderness in order to be tempted by the devil might have influenced his inclusion of that line in the prayer. Which might lead us to ask why Jesus experienced something he didn't wish on anyone else. It might also reveal that event was something Jesus never forgot. His time in the wilderness was significant; it was probably also strenuous, difficult, and seems an unlikely next step after the beauty and dramatic presence of God at Jesus' baptism.

Remember, when Jesus was baptized, the sky opened up, the Holy Spirit appeared in the form of a dove and a Voice proclaimed, "This is my Son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased." After this, we might think the next thing to do was celebrate. Throw a party. Enjoy some delicious cake. Give Jesus and everyone else time to bask in the glory of God's pronouncement. But that isn't what happened.

Instead, today's Gospel tells us the Holy Spirit led Jesus directly into a lonely place without friends or family or disciples or teachers. Whether or not there was food, he chose to fast for a long time. When he must have been at his most vulnerable, the devil showed up to tempt Jesus.

The word translated tempt or temptation can also be translated to test. When the devil showed up in that lonely place, he didn't bring a number two pencil and paper so Jesus could complete some standardized test to prove he knew enough to be the Son of God. The test of the devil was to reveal who Jesus is and what it means to be the Son of God.

All three of the devil's temptations are really testing the same thing: they are asking Jesus to prove he is God's Son by proving his divinity. But Jesus isn't only divine, Jesus is also human, and in the testing in the wilderness he revealed how good that can be.

It is often assumed that being human is bad. Perhaps you have heard someone say, "I am only human" when deflecting accountability for a mistake or selfish act. In that case, the phrase means we can't help doing bad things, so just accept it and don't expect much else. Other times the term can mean we have limits and when pushed beyond our limits we will break, get sick, or hurt. While it is healthy to understand limits and boundaries, there is still the inference that being human is to be less than good. The concept of humanity's default condition as bad or corrupt comes from many people and institutions throughout history. One of which is the church itself that points to the first man and woman in the Garden of Eden disobeying God as proof that humans are inherently flawed.

The theological problem with this concept – as many theologians and Church Doctors from history have pointed out - is it ignores the Biblical truth that God *never* pronounced humanity flawed. When God created humanity, God pronounced us good. Of course, that doesn't mean we as individuals or groups always choose well. Sometimes we forget our goodness and choose selfishly and poorly, which is where the deeply harmful beliefs and practices of the world like racism, sexism, white supremacy, injustice, violence, and all the others come from. But Jesus' test revealed it doesn't have to be that way. Because Jesus remembered the goodness of humanity when he was tempted in the wilderness.

Each temptation Jesus faced was an attempt by the devil to convince him to get to work and take all the savior of the world matters into his own hands instead of trusting God to be with him no matter what happened. It's a subtle temptation that isn't obvious at first. The temptation to miracle himself some bread to alleviate his hunger, to create a spectacle that would bring attention and likely fame, wealth, and power, and to trust the one who is very skilled at pointing out the proof of humanity's evils are all about abandoning God instead of trusting God. Each temptation suggested Jesus take control of his life because he should not have to live a hard life of rejection or suffering, like all other human beings. After all, he is God's beloved Son, and God wouldn't want pain or injustice for God's own Son. Because of Jesus' divinity, he was certainly too good to suffer.

It sounds so reasonable; so easy to believe. I'm sure God doesn't desire anyone to suffer pain, but when this is used to justify all sorts of behaviors and choices, especially those that harm or exploit people to protect a group or individual from suffering, it implies a belief that God is untrustworthy because God made humans inherently bad and therefore, we cannot help but do harmful

things. So, we must protect ourselves by taking control of our lives and the lives of others.

Jesus revealed the lie behind this temptation by choosing to trust God. In the wilderness, when he was hungry, weak, and vulnerable, the Son of God did not discard his humanity like some filthy thing he was ashamed of. He embraced it by embracing what is good about it: the intrinsic ability to choose God, to choose to love God even when it doesn't make sense. Jesus revealed his divinity by embracing his humanity by trusting God because he remembered humans are created for good, to be in relationship with God. In so doing, Jesus shows trusting or depending on God is a strength, not a flaw.

Maybe when Jesus included the line about being spared temptation in the Lord's Prayer he intended to help us remember what makes us good, that we are created in God's image, and no matter what life or the devil throws at us, we can always choose to trust God.

As we begin the season of Lent, it can be tempting to think of it as a time to focus on how bad we as individuals and humanity can be; that we are corrupt because we are, after all, only human. Some might interpret the Great Litany we prayed at the beginning of the service as evidence supporting our sinful nature. But all the petitions could also be read as reminders that we can do better than we have because it is possible, not because we are fundamentally weak and flawed, but because we are made in God's image to be in relationship with God. We are fundamentally good, created to trust God whether we are excited, happy, and content or when we get tired, hungry, frightened, angry, sad, and even when we despair. Trusting God doesn't mean being unrealistically optimistic, it means trusting God can redeem any situation, even a tragic one. It means God can heal even the most horrible of divisions. Trusting God doesn't mean we are inactive, it means we try to work with God, resisting the urge to take over and to work along with existing systems and people to follow God's will.

Lent can be an invitation to remember our goodness. That is the intention behind taking on a discipline during Lent; cultivating new habits to help us live closer to God.

I know there is a lot of bad and frightening news. The truth is, there always is bad news, and the temptation can be to believe the lie that bad news is all there is. Thank goodness we have a season that doesn't deny the bad but reminds us that is not all there is. There is all of us, our lives, the lives of those around us,

our neighbors, and there is God, always present. Sometimes we might even notice when God shows up, like an angel in the wilderness, when we remember we were made for goodness.