

Homily for Sunday, February 26, 2023



We spent the last four weeks on the mountain listening to Jesus deliver what we traditionally call the “Sermon on the Mount.” If you recall, it all began with Jesus ascending the mountain not to look *down* on us, but to get us to look *up*. He ascended the mountain to tell us the truth about who we are from God’s perspective. We are blessedness, salt and light, and we

are challenged to let the blessedness, salt and light work in our lives, so that God’s reign will come to its fulfillment. What Jesus knew and loved in us he first knew in himself. He knew he was the light, so he let his light shine and never hid it under a bushel basket.

The gospel story today, the temptations in the desert, begins *not* with, “Jesus was led by the Spirit into wilderness,” but with, “***Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness.***” I’m not sure why Matthew puts this detail in, that Jesus was led *up*. The second and third temptations also have Jesus in the “*up*” position. He is led *up* to the top of the Temple in second temptation, and he is led *up* a high mountain in the third temptation. Perhaps, just being in the one-up position brings with it greater chances of temptation. Being wealthier than others, being more educated, being white, being male, being a boss over others, being influential, being popular are all ways of describing the “one-up” position. There is nothing wrong with any of these, but there is a great temptation to use these positions for our own self-advancement. In its least destructive form, the one-up position gives us the fat head syndrome, a superiority complex; we think we are better than others. In its most destructive form, the one-up position can easily have us avoid transparency and even abuse those who are under us. Daily there seems to be no shortage of stories of abuse.

Although Jesus is led *up* into the wilderness, led *up* to the top of the Temple, and led *up* a very high mountain, he resists the temptation of taking personal privilege for himself, and he resists the temptation of saving himself. He could easily have done both by playing the “I am the Son of God” card, but he never does.

In Matthew’s version of the temptations in the desert, you may have noticed Jesus quotes scripture three times, while the devil does so once. Jesus quotes the Book of Deuteronomy three times: “***One does not live by bread alone but by every word that***

comes from the mouth of God (Dt. 8:3)...***Do not put the Lord your God to the test*** (Dt. 6:16)...***Worship the Lord your God and serve him alone*** (Dt. 6:13)." The devil himself has one come-back. He, too, can quote Scripture. In the second temptation, the devil tells Jesus, that if he is the Son of God, he should have no qualms about throwing himself from the pinnacle of the Temple. And here comes the quote from Psalm 91: ***"God will command his angels concerning you"*** and ***"on their hands they will bear you up."*** So, go for it. You won't get hurt. You're God's Son.

So, who is going to carry the day and claim our minds and our hearts? Who is the more convincing speaker? Is it the one who can give us the catchiest sound bites from Scripture? It's interesting that Jesus quotes the Book of Deuteronomy three times. It's in the Book of Deuteronomy that we get the continued story of our ancestors' 40-year journey through the desert. That 40-year journey was a journey about hungering and thirsting, about putting God to the test, about complaining, about receiving the 10 Commandments, and ultimately about trusting God who would bring them to the Promised Land. In that time, they gained a lot of wisdom, a lot of "desert wisdom."

Desert wisdom does not come from search engines on your computer nor from asking Alexa, if you're younger, or Dear Abby, if you're older, a question. Desert wisdom comes from struggle, from sacrifice, from faith, and mostly from God, if we have the eyes to see and the ears to listen. Anyone can quote and misquote Scripture, but who do you depend on for true desert wisdom in your life? Look to the people who have experienced great suffering or great love in their lives. They have the desert wisdom you need to see you through the tough times in your life. They'll get you to the Promised Land. They are the ones who have experienced the Cross and can point you to the Resurrection.

Getting back to the devil, he does indeed quote Scripture. He quotes Psalm 91 about how God's angels will bear you up and not let you harm even your foot upon a stone. It's quoted by the devil totally out of context, seemingly encouraging recklessness and irresponsibility because God's safety net will save us all in the end anyways. It makes me think of people who will not listen to doctors or good sound science in regard to preventing sickness. On "religious" grounds they refuse to get vaccinated because...well... "God will send his angels to prevent me from getting harmed; I don't need anything else." To this false substitute for faith, Jesus would say, ***"Do not put the Lord your God to the test."***

Basically, by telling Jesus to jump from the roof of the Temple, the devil is telling Jesus he's invincible. He's trying to convince Jesus that what it means to be the Son of God is that you will always be saved from any harm or even death itself. Jesus sees this as a temptation. This temptation will reappear again, in almost the exact same way, when

Jesus is dying on the Cross and passers-by yell, ***“Save yourself, if you’re the Son of God.”*** Jesus knows, in the desert, he knows on the Cross, and he knows at every moment in between, exactly what it means to be the Son of God. And what it means to be Son of God has nothing to do with taking privilege for himself or saving himself. He must have been thinking not about himself but about us, when he resisted the devil’s promptings. He knew you and I, 2000 years later, would not have the luxury of privilege or power to escape suffering and death in our own lives, so he took no privilege for himself. Instead of going *around* suffering and death, he invited us to follow him *through* these into healing and resurrection.

Lent isn’t about hailing our Lord as a hero who outmatched the devil in a Palestinian desert 2000 years ago. Lent isn’t about flexing our own morality muscles or waging our own battle with the devil. It’s more about claiming our own identity as Jesus did. It’s about going as a Church, and not just as an individual, to the desert and soaking in Christ’s wisdom. Lent is about letting go of a very individualistic attitude—my life, my devotion, my piety, my sin, my relationship with God, my prayer, my discipline, my Jesus, Jesus and me—which pretty much keeps us inside of ourselves with our imperial egos still in charge. If we dare go to the desert and meet our brothers and sisters there, like Moses of old, we will encounter hungering and thirsting, complaining and people putting the Lord to the test. In short, we will be encountering the faces of those who make up the Church.

However, if we dare to live something special over these next 40 days in the desert, we will also encounter our Lord who awaits us there. You’ll know him right away as the one who takes no privilege for himself. He will speak desert wisdom to you and remind you that you live not by bread alone but by every word that comes from his mouth.

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