

## Homily for Sunday, February 22, 2026

I have no real problem calling this gospel passage of Jesus' 40 days in the desert by what Christians have called it for a very long time--"the temptations of Christ." The devil, whatever you image that to be, is portrayed as the culprit, the one who



enticed Jesus into sin then and the one who entices us into sin now. It's much like the snake in the Genesis story we just heard. The snake is the antagonist who lured Adam and Eve into sin way back then and, by extension, is still luring us into sin today. It's one way of putting things together. But, I don't think simply

blaming the devil or the snake is the best way of making sense of this story for us today. It's a little too simplistic. Some forms of Christianity, like fundamentalist Christianity, adhere to the principle that if we just get rid of the devil from our lives (and they are always so sure who the devil is), then everything else will be smooth sailing. What's wrong with simply blaming the devil or the snake? The problem is I never have to work on myself; I never have to grow up. I just have to blame someone else for my problems. And secondly, I never learn to walk with the Lord; instead, I spend my whole life running from the devil.

Trying to uproot the devil reminds me of a struggle St. Paul had. In his second letter to the people of Corinth, he opens up about his own temptations, his own struggles. He speaks about a thorn in his flesh, and he even says that it was given to him by Satan. Since it is a thorn, and he's pretty sure it was given to

him by the devil, maybe God—if He wasn't too busy--could get rid of it. So, he prays to God three times asking God to root out this thorn. But, God says, "I'm going to leave it there. That thorn, Paul, is your teacher. I'll tell you what, Paul, I'll do this instead. I'll give you my grace, and that will be more than enough for you."

Like Paul, I'm slowly learning that my inner peace doesn't come from being able to cast out demons or remove every thorn that comes my way. God is the presence that protects me from nothing, even though God sustains me in all things. Perhaps that's why the gospel today ends with the Jesus being sustained by the angels that waited on him.

Can you believe that the infinite love of God is infinitely in love with you? Or do you believe God's love will be there only on the condition you get rid of all the thorns in you life? We must learn, like Paul had to, that this infinite flow of love never stops giving itself even in the face of our inability to get past the thorns. God was with Jesus in his temptations in the desert. God's grace was with Paul even when the thorn wasn't removed from his flesh. Why wouldn't God be with us?

That's one way of looking at this story, as a story of temptations. However, the original language of Matthew's gospel doesn't speak about temptations led by the devil but about "testing" led by God. Lots of people, in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), were seemingly tested by God to see if they would remain faithful. The faithful ones were called "children of God." I'm not so sure I like this idea that God tests us any more than I like the idea of being tempted by the devil. I think life itself tests us. And the temptation is that we want God to prove Himself (Herself) every time something rattles us in life. We can easily say, "I know you've been there for me in my past struggles, but if you really are God, you'll get me out

of this present jam.” That’s not a faith statement. It’s more akin to putting God to the test. It’s like saying, “I’ll really believe in you as the one, true God if you come to me on my terms and do what I need you to right now.”

On Ash Wednesday we received the ashes on our foreheads in what is called the “imposition of ashes.” If you’re anything like me, you hate having things imposed on you. It sounds too much like someone else’s agenda trying to take over my free will. Yet, when you think of it, much of life is imposed. There is much in the run of the day that we can’t control, much less understand.

It might, some days, feel like a temptation and on other days feel like a test from God. Whatever it is, it always feels like an imposition, a thorn in the flesh, nothing I would choose on my own. But can we believe that, in the messiness that life can be, it’s all Spirit directed? The gospel says that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. Darn it. It’s never the wilderness I would choose; it’s never the cross I feel I can carry; it’s never the thorn I’m willing to bear. Yet, in the midst of it all I’m sustained by a grace that I didn’t ask for either. God’s grace is enough. Not only is God sustaining us but, apparently, the angels are too.

*Fr. Phil*