**First Sunday of Lent**

**Saint Dunstan’s Episcopal Church, Houston, TX**

**21 February 2021**

**Mark 1: 9-15**

The local sheriff was looking for a deputy, and one of the applicants - who was not known to be the brightest academically, was called in for an interview. "Okay," began the sheriff, "What is 1 and 1?" "Eleven," came the reply. The sheriff thought to himself, "That's not what I meant, but he's right." Then the sheriff asked, "What two days of the week start with the letter 'T'?" "Today & tomorrow." Replied the applicant. The sheriff was again surprised over the answer, one that he had never thought of himself. "Now, listen carefully, who killed Abraham Lincoln?", asked the sheriff. The job seeker seemed a little surprised, then thought hard for a minute and finally admitted, "I don't know." The sheriff replied, "Well, why don't you go home and work on that one for a while?" The applicant left and wandered over to his pals who were waiting to hear about the interview. He greeted them with a cheery smile, "The job is mine! The interview went great! First day on the job and I'm already working on a murder case!"

In the Gospel of Mark (1:9-15) today is Jesus’s first day on the job. And this day begins with Baptism, followed by testing. We are told that after the glorious voice from heaven is heard, “This is my son, the beloved, listen to him”, Jesus goes into the desert to fast and pray for forty days. According to Pastor Brian P. Stoffregen, (<http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/mark1x9.htm>, whose research I will be using throughout this sermon,) both the Gospel of Matthew and Luke say that Jesus was “led by the Spirit.” Mark uses a stronger expression as Jesus was “thrown out,” “expelled,” “pushed out,” into the desert. Once in the desert, Jesus is confronted with three different tests or temptations. These are to turn stones into bread, to jump from a high altitude to the rocks below, and to serve Satan.

The word used here as temptation can also mean “to test.” So, the question for me is, “Was Jesus tested or was he tempted?” These two concepts are different. Many of us who hold licenses as lawyers, doctors, social workers, nurses, etc. know that when we are tested, the licensing body is not trying to flunk us or causes us to lose faith, but rather, the licensing body wants to know that we know what we need to know and have the experience we need to have to perform the duties of our profession. We see this often in Holy Scripture, where God tests his people to see what is in their hearts. Moses in Deuteronomy 8:2 puts it this way, "Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments." So, the purpose of God’s testing is to strengthen a person’s faith and character, to help us grow, to help us clarify our value system and our priorities, to help us achieve wisdom, etc.

Temptation, on the other hand, has as its major goal to trip-up, to make someone stumble, to weaken someone’s resolve or faith, to erode confidence, to entice someone to sin. So, when we ask the question, “Was Jesus tested or tempted?” the answer is “yes.” From a divine standpoint Jesus was tested for the work ahead. From the standpoint of the enemy, known here as Satan and in Matthew and Luke as the Devil, Jesus is tempted. The enemy’s intention is not to help Jesus discern his mission, clarify his faith, strengthen his resolve... The purpose of the testing is just the opposite. The enemy wants Jesus to take the crown without the necessity of the cross. He wants Jesus to grasp at his divinity so strongly that he would deny his humanity. He wants Jesus to avoid the suffering and the pain that human life entails. He wants Jesus to ask the question, “Why be human?” This is an important question: When Jesus could very well appeal to his divinity to escape this messy, confusing, and painful world, why would he want to accept humanity? If you were given a chance to remain human and die, or to somehow enjoy everything that life on earth has to offer, while having a divine body that would never age and die, would you still choose to be human? The answer for many would be “No!” They would choose a divine body any day of the week and twice on Sundays.

This desire for eternity and immortality has been at the center of the human heart since the beginning of creation. That is why many throughout history have looked for a fountain of youth, a holy grail, or what scientists call “the cure for the death gene.” We all want to avoid our humanity. At heart, this is what the enemy’s temptations are about. I used to love this passage when I was growing up. Jesus and Satan locked in hand to hand combat. Good and evil battling out. All the cosmic forces of good fighting against the cosmic forces of evil in an epic struggle for survival. In fact, for me this was a fight between Christ, the superhero, and Satan, the challenger. It had nothing to do with me. After all, God was not calling me to save the world, I was not the Messiah.

Today, I feel very differently about this passage. I believe the tests and temptations of Jesus are very similar to temptations all of us encounter every day. We all are confronted with these temptations daily. In fact, there is evidence that for Jesus “Satan” means much more than what we understand the word to mean. For Jesus, “Satan” was anything or anyone who would stand on the way of God’s plan for him. He tells Peter, “Get away from me Satan, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (8:33.) In fact, I do not know about you, but most of the temptations in my life do not come from that enemy we call Satan, but rather from other human beings.

This was the case for Jesus as well. We know that in Mark he was tested by Pharisees “asking for a sign from heaven” (8:11), by those asking about the legality of divorce (10:2); and by the Herodians, who test him about the legality of paying taxes to Caesar (12:15). Most of Jesus’s testing came from other human beings. And this is the same for you and for me.

The first temptation was to turn a stone into bread. In other words, the enemy wants to make Jesus use his power for the wrong purposes. How many of you are tempted daily to use whatever power and authority you have for the wrong reasons? How many of us use power for selfish reasons, step on others to get to the next stage in our career, or use situational ethics to justify and rationalize our poor choices? My friends this temptation is all too real. The enemy wants Jesus to use his power to avoid the hunger of fasting, but in a deeper way, this was a temptation to use his power to avoid humanity. We all grasp at eternity and would use any means to attain it. This is a temptation for all!

The second temptation is to jump from a high distance into the rocks below. Certainly, the angels of God would come to rescue Jesus before he hit the ground. This is the temptation to prove oneself through performance. The enemy wants Jesus to perform a great act to prove that he in fact was the Messiah. How many of us seek popularity by attempting to do the impossible? How many of us focus so much on our careers that we sacrifice our families on the altar of our ambition? We become professional doers, afraid of just being. We neglect God and others because they do not fit into our “Five-year Plan,” they are not part of our strategic goals, they are not part of our professional development aspirations. This is a real temptation. Jesus today reminds us that our identity is not limited to what we do, but it is primarily determined by who we are. We are God’s children. We matter because of who we are. People do not have value because of their place on the pecking order. They have value because they are God’s children. This is a temptation many of us struggle with daily.

The third temptation is to prostrate and worship the enemy. This is the temptation to idolatry. This is the temptation to place people and things in the place of God. Many of you have heard me saying that at this very hour there are more people in America’s malls than there are in America’s churches. Idolatry is placing anything else in the place that God must occupy in our lives. We push God out of the center and replace him with money, power, addiction, or any of the other things we make into idols in our daily lives. Today Christ reminds us that we must obey the Lord our God and to him and only him we should serve. A life without God is void of meaning and purpose. All our shiny things and all our relationships will one day die out, only God remains. God is the only one worthy of worship and wants our love and our respect.

My friends, I find it interesting that all these temptations happened to Jesus after his Baptism in the Jordan. It is the same for us. Most of our temptations happen after our baptism and not before. Life after baptism is filled with strife and filled with temptation, but today Jesus gives us a road map to fight these temptations. Remain rooted in God and worship none other. Do this, and with God’s Holy Spirit any of us will be able to resist the seductive temptations of the enemy.

May God continue to bless you, Amen!