

1 Lent YB 2024 Mark's Temptation

Perfect Love

By the Rev. Salying Wong

When I imagine the tempter, I imagine a tall, radiant, beautiful man, with long blond hair in robes of silk—Lord of the Rings style. This would be in keeping with one of his names—Lucifer, meaning Morning Star, a brilliant and beautiful light. He has other names. In the temptations of Jesus, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke call our handsome man the Devil, meaning, “one who hurls slander.” But, the Gospel of Mark prefers to call him Satan, which in Hebrew means, “the arch-adversary”. Satan doesn’t show up much in the bible. He gets a few cameos here and there in the Hebrew Bible and the Apocrypha. His biggest role, you might recall, was as the one who tested Job, who tempted Job to reject God’s faithfulness. Today, on this first Sunday in Lent, Satan scores his dream role.

The lawless wilderness is Satan’s home. He is king here. He surveys his kingdom, riding astride the back of a wild beast. What’s this? At a distance, he sees Jesus running into the desert, as if chased by a Spirit. Jesus is wild, having been possessed by the Spirit at his baptism. Satan rides out to meet Jesus. In one graceful flourish of silk robes, Satan dismounts his wild beast. He stands before Jesus, the dry desert breeze blowing his fine yellow hair behind him. He grins. This is going to be so much more fun than tempting Job.

If you were to ask Satan, he would school you on a proper temptation. Most people confuse temptation with discipline. YAWN. Discipline is so boring; it only requires effort. But, with a temptation, it isn’t about effort. It is about yucky things like trust and love. The thing about a temptation, a real temptation, is that it brings you to the very cusp of your courage and it is anyone’s guess whether you will fail or succeed. Today, God has chosen temptation for Jesus, so even God

must comply with the rules of a real temptation. Otherwise, this would be called the Discipline of Jesus—not a temptation at all.

Now, the wild beasts gather around Satan, their hot breath stirring the desert sand. They paw the earth, rearing to pounce. Each beast represents a fierce temptation. Satan gives the signal and they plunge with untamed ferocity into Jesus.

If someone were to come through the desert, they wouldn't see anything—except Jesus sitting in prayer. Real temptations are unseen. They are the beasts within the human soul, and they are always about fear. In fact, as much as he would like to be, Satan knows that he isn't the real arch-enemy. Jesus' arch-enemy is himself. If he can quell the beasts within, nothing can really hurt him, even if he is killed. Satan's work is to shake Jesus' trust in love, make him doubt there is enough love in his heart, enough love from God in the most suffering places. The greatest beast that will ravage Jesus will show him exactly what it will be like to be crucified, to be abandoned by his friends, to be an utter humiliation and failure. He will be tempted to reject the path of the cross. The beast will sound very reasonable, "Why go there? There's no need to go to the cross. All the suffering will be pointless."

For 40 days and 40 nights, the beasts plunge into Jesus, ravaging his body with words of unbearable reality and insistent common sense. How will he survive such compelling reason? Where is the Spirit? As each beast digs its talons into him, Jesus keeps his inner eye to the Spirit. Their eyes become one eye, one knowing, one love. As long as he keeps this gaze upon the Spirit, he knows there is enough love; he finds his courage; his fear is not convincing. Jesus prevails against his temptations because perfect love casts out all fear.

At the end of 40 days and 40 nights, Satan leaves him. Satan's not done. No, he's just going to change his strategy. He'll be back by next week's lectionary reading.

Jesus is left exhausted and injured, but purified of fear. The angels tend to his wounds. Now, he is ready to go public and announce that all can live with freedom from fear, freedom from the beasts that prowl in the human soul. They will live with the Good News that God never abandons them, not even in the worst things. Jesus will baptize those whom he touches with the Holy Spirit, so that if they choose, love will be their guide from an ingrown existence to one that opens petal by petal, as Spring opens the rose.

Today, consider what beasts prowl within you, keeping you hostage in your fears. In the time of Lent, pray with the Spirit for the courage to move into the freedom that has already been given to you. What movements can you make to claim what is already yours?