

**Homily, St. Andrew's  
Lent 1C, Feb 14, 2016  
Luke 4:1-13**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

There's an interesting rock song with a heavy urban beat that asks: "If the sun vaporized one day; and the moon just faded away; would we still keep going on; at this speed of a maddening pace?; Should the birds fall to the ground; And the fish die of thirst; Would we still keep on living; the way it's always been?; Now if the air could burn our lungs; And the earth were only rocks; Would it make us stop and realize; That we can't go on like this?" It's a song that questions how we live in the world and wonders, in a sense, what it will take for us to make different choices. These verses seem to be speaking to us, the general populace, but when the chorus comes, the subject of address changes as they sing: "Devil, oh devil, won't you tell me why; I must live in these desperate times?"

The theology behind the song is fascinating. There is a kind of lament about the state of the world we live in and questioning about what it would take for us to make different choices about how we live in the world. And then it turns to address, not God, as we might expect, but the devil. The assumption seems to be that the devil is in charge of the world, and so it is the devil who is asked: "... won't you tell me why, I must live in these desperate times?" On the one hand, it is such a twist, a turning upside down of how we view the world, and yet on the other hand, there is something insightful about the observations of the world and there is something faithful about taking the devil to task for it. There is something hopeful about acknowledging the power of evil, for the purpose of challenging it. And there is something hopeful about going on the offensive against that which we know to be wrong.

Our Gospel story today also takes on evil, personified as the devil, though in a different way. Jesus has just been baptized and is full of the Holy Spirit. This Spirit, the Spirit of God, believes in Jesus and is with Jesus, as Jesus is led into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Jesus eats nothing and the devil is smart, waiting until Jesus is starving, to go on the offensive against this Spirit-filled man: "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." What a temptation it is! You don't need God to feed you. You can feed yourself and then, perhaps, you can turn all the stones into bread and feed the world! There are many who are hungry who would cheer. You can save the hungry masses, by starting with yourself first. Jesus responds only by quoting scripture: "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

And so the devil takes a different tact. If the personal and social need for food, for material resources, isn't enough to make Jesus turn from God, then perhaps political power will. The devil shows him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world and says: "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." I wonder if Jesus had a moment of vertigo as he saw all the kingdoms of the world, all their problems and all the good he could do, all the healing he could bring, if he took the devil up on his offer. With such authority, such power over the kingdoms of the world, Jesus could do much to liberate oppressed people. And Jesus

answers, again from scripture: “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

The devil is down, perhaps, but not out. There is something else that remains... something that was surely close to Jesus’ heart... the place and power of religion in his world. And so the devil takes him to Jerusalem, and places him on the pinnacle of the temple. The devil has learned... if it is scripture that Jesus uses to rebuff temptation, then scripture is a good tool. And so the devil quotes from Psalm 91: “It is written, ‘He will command angels concerning you, to protect you, and on their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” It is perhaps the ultimate temptation... show the world the power, not of the devil, but of God. Show everyone why they should believe and worship God! Prove God’s existence... go ahead. Jump. Jesus is not fooled, not even by the scripture, and responds again with his own verse from scripture: “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

And the devil is out of ideas. At least for the moment, for “when the devil had finished every test, he departed from Jesus until an opportune time.” If the devil’s challenge was “What will it take for you to turn from faithfulness to God and God’s will and choose instead the power of the world?” Jesus’ answer is ‘nothing’. Jesus’ answer is to give up power, to let go of influence and to challenge the powers that be. Jesus’ answer is a journey to the cross.

Last Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, we too began a journey to the cross with Jesus. The sign of ashes drawn on our foreheads is a reminder that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. It is a sign of our mortality, and in the acknowledgement and acceptance of this mortality, we are freed to live fully and abundantly. This is what the journey to the cross and to life is about, and as we begin the season of lent today, we have the opportunity to examine the ways in which we have given in to evil and make it right. Lent is about resisting the temptations that come our way and it is an opportunity to challenge the devil like the song does: “Devil, oh devil, won’t you tell me why; I must live in these desperate times?” What would it take for you to take on evil in your life this lent?

I have asked friends, and I’ve been asked by friends, what it would take to leave a relationship that was unhappy and even destructive. We usually know when relationships aren’t working well, but it can be hard to find the strength to make a change by either honestly addressing and working out the problems or bringing the relationship to an end. Whatever we do, we often need to continue to resist the temptation to fall back into a familiar pattern.

The TV show “The Biggest Loser” is about people who have finally arrived at a point where being over-weight has become untenable and they want to make a change. What it has taken for them to get there is often the realization of their own mortality, realizing that their unhealthy weight is stealing years of life from them. And so some decide to take back their life in a dramatic, TV show way, and then the challenge is to resist the temptation to go back to old ways when they return home.

‘Hitting bottom’ is the description used for what it sometimes takes for an alcoholic to stop drinking. Sometimes it takes failing miserably, or getting fired, to finally find the courage to go back to school or otherwise do whatever it takes to be happier and live a more authentic life. It often seems to take a huge natural or human-made disaster to focus world attention on the poorest or most desperate people in the world. It took a picture of a small boy’s body washed up on a beach last fall to bring the plight of thousands of refugees to the front of our minds. We know that many were suffering well before that picture broke through our denial. It is not unlike

how the unhappy and unproductive employee is miserable well before the failure; and the alcoholic or drug addict is in serious pain well before hitting bottom. It is sad that it so often takes tragedy to wake us up enough to want to turn around, or turn back, to the God of peace, joy and forgiveness, who loves us and accompanies us through it all.

The wisdom Jesus offers us today is to resist evil before it enters our life and before it takes us even one step down a wrong road. It is wisdom, to be sure, and it is foolishness to think that we can do so perfectly. Real temptation, the most difficult temptation, is an offer not to fall but to rise, particularly in doing good, like feeding the hungry, liberating the oppressed, and proving God's power, by using the power of the world. True temptation, the worst temptation, is the seduction that we can beat the powers of the world by using the power of the world. And yet the way of Jesus involves giving up all worldly power with an unrelenting commitment to peace with justice through sacrificial love.

Jesus knows our struggle with temptation because Jesus too struggled. Jesus also provides us with the way home when we miss the mark and take the wrong road. With Jesus, we always get another chance and each day is another opportunity to face down temptation and choose life through the Spirit of God instead. The gift of lent is in the encouragement to self-reflection and self-examination so that we can turn back to God before a crisis hits.

And so may God give you fresh insight into your own life this lent. May we go on the offensive against evil - in our individual lives and in the world. May we choose to let go, to give up, whatever temptation is killing us, that we may know once more the abundance of resurrection life.