

by Magrey R. deVega

February 21

First Sunday of Lent
Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16;
Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

When preaching on this gospel narrative, pastors commonly structure their sermons around Jesus' three temptations. The story, after all, has a convenient three-point outline built into it. We tend to treat the story as a parable, looking for hidden meaning behind "stones being turned into bread," and asking what "all the kingdoms of the world" might symbolize for us. Or, we try squeezing the temptations into categories, like the allure of provision, prestige, and protection (with bonus points for the alliteration.)

But there is equal value in looking at the space between the temptations. Whereas Matthew and Mark imply that these three encounters were only part of Jesus' forty days, Luke implies that the temptation was constant, throughout the time he was in the wilderness ("for forty days he was tempted by the devil.") In fact, only Luke suggests that once the wilderness temptations concluded, there remained the possibility of a return by the devil at a more "opportune time." Indeed, Luke specifies the same three temptations as Matthew, but he also wants to suggest that there is much more to this story than what is indicated on the surface.

What happened during those other thirty-seven days? Was the devil a constant presence in his life, and was the temptation more of an ongoing dialogue rather than episodic conversations? Or was the devil's presence on those three days the crystallization of the ongoing, deeper, inner struggles happening within Jesus' mind and heart?

Regardless of how the actual temptations occurred, we do know two things: he was led by the Spirit and he fasted. Luke wants to offer these in dynamic tension, by saying that while Jesus' stomach was empty, he was "full of the Holy Spirit." In fact, this is one of Luke's favorite phrases, appearing recurrently throughout the book of Acts. Both Stephen and Barnabas were characterized in this way: the former was the first martyr, and the latter served a people who were first called Christians. For Luke, being filled with the Spirit inaugurated a new movement in history, when something dramatic and significant would be introduced to the world.

It is appropriate, then, that the first Sunday of Lent begins with this text and this challenge: be filled with the Holy Spirit, engage the struggles of life, and start a new journey. The greatest temptations for some are periodic; for others, they are more frequent. Regardless, we should remember that spiritual preparation must be constant. For though the temptations come and go, they only "depart until an opportune time."

February 28

Second Sunday of Lent
Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27; Philippians
3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

When Jesus responds to the Pharisees' feigned concern over his safety, we can almost hear Jesus say, "Do you think I was born yesterday?" Jesus is wise to their game and their alliance with Herod, whom he calls a fox—the slyest, most conniving of all creatures.

As quickly as he identifies the trap, he brushes

it aside, re-centering the focus on what matters the most to him: Jerusalem. More than the center of the political, theological, and social order, it was also Jesus' ultimate destination, the culmination of his earthly mission: to redeem the world and rectify people's broken relationships with God. To Jesus, nothing else mattered.

Luke's is the only gospel to record this exchange with the Pharisees, including Jesus' reference to Herod as a fox. Luke offers a lesson here for anyone suffering the scorn of opponents: stick to the mission. Remember what's most important. Jesus refused to get hung up on the feeble power games played by his political enemies, and chose instead to get to work, and accomplish the tasks he was called to fulfill.

Having made his point, Luke could have concluded the story here, with a determined Jesus focused on his mission. Instead, he complements this portrait with a depiction of an emotional, poignant Jesus. In contrast to the fox, we see Jesus as the hen, and we can hear the ache in his voice as he longs for the people to turn from their waywardness and turn toward this new kingdom.

We thus see a Jesus in balance. With mind and heart, he is equal parts controlled and compassionate, determined and devoted. He did not allow petty personal skirmishes to stand in the way of the larger picture: the repentance and redemption of all humanity.

Ultimately, this text challenges our priorities. What is preventing us from concentrating on our work for the greater good? What incidental conflicts are keeping us from "finishing our work?"

March 7

Third Sunday of Lent
Isaiah 55:1-9; Psalm 63:1-8;
1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

The opening verses of this gospel reading contain enigmatic references to mixed-blood sacrifices and tower-crumbling catastrophes, whose exact meaning may be impossible to determine. Rather than brush them aside as anachronistic or

be thrown by their gore and violent imagery, we should focus on the basic assumption underlying the peoples' questions: Are there some sins that are worse than others?

Lent is the right time to ask these questions, and acknowledge how prone we are to self-condolence born out of denial. We convince ourselves that our sinful habits are not nearly as bad as, say, the more scandalous, headline-grabbing sins of those more infamous than us.

The epistle addresses this misperception with more specific (and, thankfully, less violent) anecdotes. Paul draws from the story of the Israelites: the bold, risk-taking, spiritual pioneers of the faith. Yet, they too were prone to self-delusion, convinced of their own piety yet tarnished by a myriad of sins. Despite being baptized by Moses and partakers of the same "spiritual food and drink," God was not pleased with them, for they were idolaters and complainers who engaged in sexual immorality and put Christ to the test.

Implicit in both the epistle and the gospel is this lesson for Lent: if these great heroes in the Bible were far from perfect, what makes us think that we are? For as Paul writes, "These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come."

Fortunately, the gospel text takes a turn toward grace. Lest we think that we are all doomed to punishment for even the most trivial of sins, Luke gives a notion of hope. Jesus offers a vivid parable about a fig tree that had ceased bearing fruit (one of the gospel's favorite images for people failing to live up to their intended purpose.) The owner of the garden had become disgusted with its lack of productivity and was ready to give up on it. But the gardener intervened, and successfully secured a stay of the tree's execution, giving one more chance to turn itself around. With proper nourishment and care by the gardener, this tree had a chance to get things right.

In the end, this is the heart of the gospel message. Ask for forgiveness, then accept it in full. Repent and receive. For we have a second chance to bear fruit.

M arch 14

Fourth Sunday of Lent
Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32;
2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

The widely known Parable of the Prodigal Son is beautiful both in its theology and its construction. Not only does it speak of God's lavish grace for the wayward and lost, it does so with an accurate appraisal of humanity and a detailed prescription for its redemption.

The son faces three problems, which cover the gamut of the human condition. The first is of his own making: his lack of discipline and personal responsibility has resulted in a squandering of his fortune and a condition of dire desperation. The second is his loss of community: he had no support system, no friends to aid him, and, having nothing left but the slop he fed the pigs, "no one gave him anything." And finally, there was something beyond his control: a famine spread throughout the country, decimating the economy and sealing his impoverished state.

The turn of the parable offers a one-to-one remedy for each of his three problems. To address his lack of discipline, the son acknowledges his mistakes, repents of his past, and determines to make things right with his father. To answer his loss of community, he seeks companionship among the hired hands, hoping that he can forge new connections and a new system of support.

The final problem, the famine of the land, is never reversed in the parable. We hear nothing of a change in the weather or an upswing in the economy. But just as the famine was not of the son's creation, neither was his dramatic redemption at the end of the story. The lavish grace and forgiveness of the father in welcoming back the son brings ultimate restoration to the son's condition. Instead of a famine, there is a feast. Instead of poverty, there is a party.

In one parable, we have the full picture of sin, in all its forms, as well as its remedies. For the sins that we have committed, there is repentance and forgiveness. For systemic sins that plague

communities, there is a vision of mutual support and sustenance. And for the sinful condition that affects all of humanity, regardless of behavior or choice, there is the lavish, undeserved embrace of a God who welcomes us home.

M arch 21

Fifth Sunday of Lent
Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126;
Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

The anointing of Jesus is recorded in all four gospels, but John's version contains several important nuances. In the synoptic gospels, the characters are unnamed and generalized; Jesus is anointed by "a woman with an alabaster flask of ointment" and criticized by the "disciples" (in Matthew), or the "Pharisee" (in Luke), or simply "some" people (in Mark).

John, however, wants to name names. Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, is the one with the perfume, and she is immediately rebuked by Judas Iscariot, the betraying disciple. John's choice to identify these characters specifically is more than mere literary preference. He constructs a high-profile, star-studded confrontation, between two of Jesus' closest friends. These were not two undistinguished people engaging in obscure conversation. These two were among the people who knew him the best and, as a result, had the most at stake in his future.

And though John goes to great lengths to describe the cost of the perfume, he wants us to know that the significance of Mary and Judas' spat is not ultimately about the money. It is about the basic difference in perspective they have about Jesus' future.

A comparison of translations of John 12:7 reveals a wide variety of renderings of Mary's motive, which is critical in understanding the heart of this debate. Some translations have Jesus urging Mary to save the perfume for his burial, as if Mary had little knowledge of his crucifixion. ("Let her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. NASB). Others have Jesus speaking eso-

terically about the potential of the perfume (“It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. NIV).

The Greek text, however, suggests that Mary was intentional about keeping it for the express reason of using it for Jesus’ burial. (“She has kept this for the day of my burial.”) Mary knew what she was doing and knew Jesus’ destiny.

Here, then, is the key difference between Mary and Judas. Mary’s acquisition and preservation of the perfume was in full knowledge and anticipation of Jesus’ crucifixion, despite the fact that most other people, including Jesus’ very own disciples, had failed to understand and accept Jesus’ imminent death. Judas clearly did not get it, and saw the situation in practical terms.

In naming Mary and Judas, John elevates their discussion to a high level of importance, therefore inviting his readers to choose sides. Either they will understand Jesus as Mary did or as Judas did. They will see him through a cruciform lens, with self-sacrifice and self-denial, or they will set themselves up with false expectations and face eventual disappointment.

March 28

Palm Sunday

Isaiah 50:4-9; Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29;
Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 19:28-40

It’s always odd to read Luke’s rendition of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, since his is the only version not to mention palm branches. Whereas Mark is obsessed with the details of the branches (calling them “leafy” and “cut from the fields”) and John is the only one to name the branches as “palm,” Luke is disinterested in this kind of heavenly horticulture. It could be that since Luke is writing to a generally Gentile audience, he feels it unnecessary to portray the Messiah with Jewish symbolism that would be lost among his readers.

But what Luke lacks in greenery, he makes up for in drama. His is the only gospel to record

the dialogue between the Pharisees and Jesus after his arrival. The charge is disturbing the peace (“Teacher, rebuke your disciples.”) Jesus responds that if he silenced his followers, then the stones would assume the shouting. Shrieking stones is a strong image, particularly in light of a God who has a resume of bringing life out of inanimate objects. This God breathed life into a lump of clay to create human beings. God speaks words of judgment to Habakkuk through stone-filled walls. And in this gospel, John the Baptist affirmed God’s ability to raise Abraham’s descendants from the stones (Luke 3:8). Clearly, if the disciples went silent, the stones would be ready.

But the disciples were not silent. They threw caution to the wind, displaying an unfettered enthusiasm, unencumbered by societal restriction or personal inhibition. Their response is a complementary bookend to the story immediately preceding Jesus’ entry to Jerusalem. Whereas Matthew and Mark locate the parable of the talents long after Jesus’ arrival, Luke places it immediately beforehand. Its placement suggests a model for how followers of Christ are to behave as they enter the passion of Holy Week: bold, unafraid of cultural pressure, and determined to live self-sacrificially, rather than cautiously.

Of course, seasoned Lenten pilgrims are well aware that this is just the beginning. The disciples, over a week’s time, do become silent. They fall away from Jesus, one by one, until he is left to die alone on Calvary’s hill. But by week’s end, a stone does cry out. The one that is rolled away from the tomb becomes the first witness to a resurrection that has triumphed over death, and signals the arrival of a new dawn.



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