

LENT I

After his baptism, Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.

Luke 4: 1

Today we will baptize Isabella Marie Robertson, welcoming her into the Body of Christ. As always, we celebrate these occasions with great joy here at St. John's.

Today is also the first Sunday of Lent, and the story of Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, the first great trial of his public ministry. Because, make no mistake, wrestling with temptation is a big part of ministry – any ministry.

I was on the verge of writing a grim and graphic sermon about how it would have been for Jesus, fasting for 40 days in the desert, but that didn't seem appropriate on such a celebratory occasion. So I'll save that for another year.

But the story of the temptation is, nonetheless, a fitting story for the day when we initiate someone into the mysteries of the body of Christ. The temptations outlined in the story of Jesus' struggle with Satan may seem exotic and out of our ordinary human experience. But we can easily translate all of them into commonplace seductions. The temptation to change stones to bread involving, as well, the temptation – more familiar to us all – to give up on some discipline or resolution we have made, to indulge ourselves in what we have sworn to forsake. The temptation to seize power and glory in whatever forms they present themselves to us – also well known to us as ambition. And the temptation to cede power and control entirely to God, trusting God to micromanage our fate, and the concomitant temptation to blame God for all our misfortunes and mistakes, rather than making ourselves accountable.

In the promises Isabella's parents and sponsors will soon make for her, they will say the following:

Q. Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?

A. I renounce them.

Q. Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?

A. I renounce them.

Q. Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?

A. I renounce them.

So here we have Satan and the spiritual forces of wickedness, evil powers of the world, and sinful desires. I'm not entirely sure about the difference between spiritual forces and evil powers. I'm guessing that spiritual forces may have more to do with our inner lives – and our collective inner lives perhaps – what I call systemic sin, or original sin, while evil powers have more to do with external or natural evils and the devastation they can wreak on human good intentions. Let's say an earthquake with an aftermath of looting, for example. And sinful desires are self-evident.

So here, in the baptismal vows, we have the pledged renunciation of both inner sin and outer evil. The story of the temptation in the desert presents one set of concepts or images, and the baptismal vows a somewhat different, though arguably parallel set. Scripture, and tradition, as well as our own experience, tell us there are forces in the world that oppose love, health, wholeness, peace, and justice. We may not think of Satan personified today, as Scripture does. But we know that there is evil in the world, and that we are called to struggle against it daily.

We know, furthermore, that those of us called by God and committed to the way of God in the world who experience most forcefully the struggle with evil. We know from the writings of saints and mystics that the closer they draw to full communion with God, the more convicted they become of their own wickedness. And I think that those of us who are honest about our journeys of faith generally admit that moral challenges do not disappear, but perhaps become ever more complex and nuanced, as we progress through our lives in Christ.

I said earlier that Jesus' 40 days in the desert are the beginning of his public ministry, and I think we must remember that: *the beginning*. The Gospel writers do not want us to believe that in undergoing the rigors of these 40 days, Jesus got temptation out of the way forever.

In Mark's and Matthew's versions of the temptation story, angels come to minister to Jesus, but Luke, our gospel writer this year, while very comfortable with angels, does not include them here. Satan simply disappears until an opportune time to resume the battle, as happens in the person of Judas. Indeed, in the midst of the endgame, Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemene, he prays that the cup of suffering might pass from his lips. So the account of his ministry is bookended with appearances of the Tempter, and Jesus' struggles with all that the Tempter represents: comfort of body and

spirit, acclaim, belief in an all-protective God and Jesus' reliance on his "special relationship" with that God.

Jesus' story, and our story. The story of our baptism into Christ's death, and our rebirth into new life. A story that tells us that evil does not disappear through denial, avoidance, or thinking only happy thoughts. If Jesus wrestled, why should any of us think that believing exempts us from the fray?

And like the story of the temptations in the wilderness, the story of baptism is about beginnings. Most of you know that one of the things I feel most strongly about in parish ministry is that baptism signifies the joining and the welcome of a new member into a community – this community, as it represents the whole Body of Christ. I do everything I can to discourage people who seem to think that baptism is something that is "done" to babies without a commitment on the part of parents to take part in our life together, and to give the same opportunity to their children.

We at St. John's are rightfully proud of our commitment to our children. We offer a pledge to them when, in the service of baptism we vow to support them in their own spiritual journeys. And we do our best to honor that pledge during their time with us. A newcomer commented to me last year that what impressed her most about the congregation was that everybody clearly knew all the children, and welcomed them, and felt some responsibility for them.

And that's what we promise our children, and what we are about to promise Isabella, and her parents on her behalf. Not that her life will be easy, free from pain, struggle, or temptation. But that we, and other followers of Jesus whom she'll encounter throughout her life, stand with her in her struggles, join her in her hunger for peace and justice, and signify to her, as she will to us, the hands and heart of Christ in the world.

Amen

