



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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## Lead Us Not Into Temptation

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 6, 2022*

*The First Sunday in Lent*

*Based on Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 1-13*

*Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.*

*Take our lips and speak through them.*

*Take our hearts and see through them.*

*Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen*

If you didn't pick up on the great big clue offered by the singing of *The Great Litany* or note the change in the color of the vestments, today marks The First Sunday in Lent. Lent was originally a time, created by the Church, when candidates for Baptism were required to fast during the 40 days before Easter, at which point they would be baptized into the Christian faith. Today we use this season as a time to explore and reaffirm the vows made in Baptism. And it's probably worth spending a little time talking about what Lent is actually supposed to be.

On Ash Wednesday we had a great experience this year imposing ashes on people on the steps and on the sidewalk in front of the church, which gave a number of people the opportunity to ask us what in the world we were doing and what did it all mean? Lent is a time for growing in the Christian faith: a time for deeper prayer, heart-searching examination, and repentance. It can be a time of self-discipline, renewal, and even transformation.

In the midst of a pandemic, there may be no need for great acts of contrition to mortify the flesh. Great sacrificial acts of penitence and humility may not be required. Maybe we've had quite enough of that already. But the pandemic, along with other events around the world this year, does invite us to a *particular* remembrance of what's important in our lives. If we're clearer now that we are not going to live forever, how then *should* we use the years we've been given? How is God calling us to be? What is God calling us to do? This is a season when we can genuinely "excavate" those questions.

There are, actually, 46 days in the Season of Lent, which began on Ash Wednesday and concludes on Easter Eve at the Easter Vigil. However, the six Sundays in Lent aren't counted as part of Lent because every Sunday is considered a celebration of the Resurrection. Therefore the season is still referred to as the 40 Days of Lent.

At the end of Lent, we come to Holy Week, the time when we focus on the events of Jesus' last week on earth, his Passion, and his death. Holy Week begins with Palm Sunday, a recalling of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It includes Maundy Thursday (the word Maundy coming from the Latin *mandatum*, meaning mandate or commandment), when we recall Christ's Last Supper with his disciples, the institution of the Lord's Supper, and Christ's commandment that we do this in remembrance of him. On Good Friday we recall the crucifixion of Jesus. (That term probably came

from the phrase, “God’s Friday,” just as our word “Good-bye’ comes from the phrase, “God be with you.”)

Now, this morning gospel’s lesson focuses on the temptations of Christ in the wilderness. Immediately after his baptism, Jesus faces the first real spiritual test of his public ministry. Temptation is a funny thing.

“Son,” ordered a father, “don’t swim in that canal.” “Okay, Dad,” he answered. But the son came home that evening carrying a wet bathing suit. “Where have you been?” demanded the father. “Swimming in the canal,” answered the boy. “Didn’t I tell you not to swim there?” asked the father. “Yes, sir,” answered the boy. “So, why did you?” the father asked.

“Well, Dad,” he explained, “I had my swim suit with me and I couldn’t resist temptation.” “Why did you take your swim suit with you?” he questioned. “So, I’d be prepared to swim, just in case I was tempted,” the boy replied.”<sup>i</sup>

“Just in case I was tempted.” So, to begin with, we need to make a couple of things clear about temptation. First, the devil is not the “opposite” of God. God has no true opposite. The opposite character to the devil would be Michael, the Archangel. There is no other uncreated Being besides God. There is no other Being that has been self-existent from all eternity.

Second, *dualism* is the school of thought that maintains there are two equally powerful, opposing forces of good and evil locked in mortal combat over the fate of the world. It may sound reasonable (and even a little bit true!), but this is, and always has been, a Christian heresy. Orthodox Christianity has always maintained that there is “purposeful evil” in the world, but that this anti-God entity is a creature—and a defeated creature at that—in the paschal drama of Christ crucified and raised from the dead. In other words, the devil is not as powerful as you may think. C.S. Lewis said that when it came to the devil, two mistakes were made by Christians: over-emphasis and under-emphasis.”<sup>ii</sup> I think that may be true.

Now, the concept of “temptation” in scripture usually falls into one of two categories. First is the notion of testing. Spiritual strength is often proven by the faithful being put through some sort of test and then remaining faithful throughout the time of testing. In the hero’s journey, there must always be the great ordeal.

- God tests Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac. (Genesis 22:1-19)
- Job is fiercely tested by a series of trials that eventually reveal the depth of his commitment to God. (Job 1-7)
- The author of 1<sup>st</sup> Peter sees the persecution of the early Christian community as a kind of testing which ultimately leads the community to develop a deeper belief in Christ. (1 Peter 1:3-9)

In passing these tests, the faithful strengthen their character and deepen their commitment to God. The Apostle Paul, speaking as one who had faced many such tests—from his well-known “thorn in the flesh” to the multiple misfortunes he endured over the course of his ministry—could honestly say to the church in Rome, “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” Words we should probably hear on a regular basis.

The second understanding of “temptation” has more to do with the common “the devil made me do it” types of enticement that leads one away from God and from a right relationship with one’s neighbors. The writers of scripture repeatedly insist that God does not tempt humans being to sin. The author of the Letter of James declares, “No one, when tempted, should say, ‘I am being tempted by God;’ for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one.”<sup>iii</sup> (James 1:13) And Paul assures the church in Corinth, “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.” (1 Corinthians 10:13)

Still, all things considered, we should probably leave our swimsuits at home. Temptation is a funny thing.

The Greek word in question here, the one used in the Gospel According to Luke, is *peirazomenos*, which has principally to do with the experience of being tested. It means that Luke 4:2 may be accurately rendered, “Jesus was... tested... by the devil.”<sup>iv</sup> As are we all. As are we all, tested and hardened by the evil forces and powers of this world.

Writers ranging from John Milton to Fyodor Dostoyevsky have made the point that in the temptations Satan is dangling before Jesus, there is a speeded-up-way of accomplishing his mission. It is clear that Jesus could dazzle the crowds with his ability to create food on demand. He could protect himself from danger. He could take control of the kingdoms and principalities of this world. Wouldn’t it be a much faster, much more efficient, messiahship? In Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Satan taunts, “Why move thy feet so slow to what is best?” Indeed. Why tarry, Jesus?

God’s terrible insistence on human freedom is so absolute that God grants us the power to live as though God does not even exist. I confess to having prayed for a God who would act differently. For example, I confess to wishing God would simply reach down from the heavens and, with one flick of a finger, knock Vladimir Putin off his throne. How many lives would have been saved this past week? How much misery might be prevented in the coming weeks?

Yet, it is Dostoyevsky who speaks of Jesus’ “miracle of restraint.” The miracles Satan suggests, the signs the Pharisees demanded, and the final powerful actions I might like to see, offer no serious challenge for a truly omnipotent God. Thunderbolts and lightning are easy. Simple. Far more amazing is God’s refusal to perform or entertain or overwhelm.

Scott Cairns writes in his provocative book, *The End of Suffering*, “The God-created world is an exceedingly wild place. Its weather and its very makeup... it’s famously cranky geology remain notoriously unpredictable. Bad things happen to good people; good things happen to bad. And even setting aside the simply bad, there is also no shortage of downright evil, from which the good do not appear to be uniformly protected.

“What kind of God is this? Whether or not you think the world was initially created as the shaky sphere it is—a notoriously unstable crust skidding over a roiling swirl of molten rock—there’s just no arguing that it’s something of a crapshoot now. Earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, landslides, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, famines, floods: take your pick. And lest we forget the human hand in our crapshoot, we must remember to add to that wild mix our own pathological history of aggression, murder, war, and genocide.

“And where, exactly, is our God in all of this? Well, the story goes that God has descended into the very thick of it. The story goes that God remains in the very thick of it.”<sup>v</sup>

I don't know precisely how you should spend your Lent. I don't know what you should give up or what you should take on. I *do* know that if you make any kind of genuine effort, if you invest in any amount of prayer or self-examination, the journey may well turn out to be the destination. And all of your temptations will be revealed by God for what they truly are.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> *Year C, Synthesis, Lent 1*, February 21, 2010, p. 4.

<sup>ii</sup> *Year C, Synthesis, Lent 1*, March 4, 2001, p. 4.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid* p. 4.

<sup>iv</sup> Arland J. Hultgren, *RCL/Narrative/Evangelio/ Index*, "Commentary on Luke 4:1-13," p. 1.

<sup>v</sup> Scott Cairns, *The End of Suffering*, Paraclete Press, Orleans, Massachusetts, c. 2009, p. 108.

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