

# ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Lent 1-C (6 March 2022)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

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## **Collect**

Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen**

*Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Psalm 91:1-2,9-16, Romans 10:8b-13, Luke 4:1-13*

## **1 I. Sin**

*In nomine patris...*

If you have a prayer book handy, I invite you to open it to page 848. There near the back of our prayer book is a Catechism, a set of questions and answers about the basic things that Christians, and especially Episcopalians, need to know. I'm going to ask you three questions about *sin* and *redemption* beginning at the bottom of page 848 and I invite you to respond by reading aloud together the answers you find therein.

Q. What is sin?

A. Sin is the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation.

Q. How does sin have power over us?

A. Sin has power over us because we lose our liberty when our relationship with God is distorted.

Q. What is redemption?

A. Redemption is the act of God which sets us free from the power of evil, sin, and death.

Every year we begin Lent with the story of the temptation of Jesus. This is a powerful story; an evocative story. You can read it as historical fact or as metaphor, through a psychological lens or an ethical one. You can see yourself in story as the one being tempted or the one doing the tempting. You can read it in all sorts of ways and it still has power.

We live in an era in which it's not polite or conventional to talk about devils and evil spirits. Those conversations we tend to leave to our more excitable neighbors. But the first thing to notice about this story is that it doesn't even matter whether you believe in a personified devil or not. The existence and presence of evil in our world is self-evident. We all have seen it around us, we all have experienced evil and wrong first-hand. We have been hurt by evil and those we love have been hurt by it. When evil enters into our own perspectives, opinions, and relationships, we call that "sin."

## 2 II. What is sin?

We hold that Jesus was without sin. But Holy Writ tells us that Jesus was tempted. Whatever form that temptation took in his life. Jesus had decisions to take, choices to make, in deciding upon the path and the tenor of his life. Jesus, it seems, enjoyed some aspects of power and privilege that boggle our imagination.

The first temptation involves the turning of stones to bread so that Jesus can eat. Sometimes I laugh out loud when I hear today's Gospel text read. He fasted 40 days. And he was hungry. How's that for an understatement?!? I don't know anyone who has fasted 40 days. But I know how grumpy I get after only 24 or 36 hours of fasting. If turning stones to bread was a possibility for Jesus, then there was also the temptation to use that capacity for his own benefit, to break his fast not because his intended purpose was accomplished, but because his tummy was growling. Jesus could have chosen to elevate his own wants and desires as the most important motivations in his life. But he didn't.

The second temptation is an offer of power and fame. These are the forces that seem to make the world go 'round. Given the ways they get abused, and are used to abuse others, I would not be surprised to see someone make the case that power and fame really are the dominion of the devil. The devil claims he has been given a particular authority. I know in my life I all the time give the devil authority. When my decisions are fueled by fear, anxiety, greed, a desire to be liked or feared or respected, or just plain irritability, I often yield authority to these evil forces in my life and make, shall we say, sub-optimal decisions. By manipulating the hurt and the evil in the world around us, the devil exercises authority over great swathes of human behavior. Jesus could have chosen to follow the path of manipulating and controlling others through their appetites and weaknesses. But he didn't.

The last temptation is the best. The devil actually quotes Scripture at Jesus. Maybe you've heard it said that you can prove anything you want by taking Scripture out of context. Apparently even the devil can do it. And imagine the fame and notoriety Jesus would gain with such a public, flamboyant stunt! Flying off the high tower of the temple would be much more impressive than riding into town on a donkey. Jesus could have gained a following as well fame and power by doing magic tricks to get everyone to pay attention to him. But he didn't.

In each of these temptations, the devil invites Jesus to put his own short-term interests ahead of the less-glamorous paths of God in his life. The devil invites Jesus to put himself first, and God second. The devil invites Jesus, as our catechism says, to seek his own will instead of that of God. Doing so would have distorted Jesus' relationships with God, with humanity, and with all creation.

And in doing so, Jesus would have lost his liberty and become the devil's slave. Because one loaf of bread, one moment of fame, one feat of notoriety, never would have been enough. Always the hunger comes back, demanding more. Sin is like an addiction to alcohol or other drugs. Even as it distorts your life and damages your relationships, the advantages you perceived fade away and you require greater amounts just to feel OK for today.

### **3 III. What's at the center?**

Sin is not about following or failing to follow an arbitrary list of rules. Avoiding sin is not about “being a good person.” The church does not exist to teach you to be nice. The question of faith is, what is at the very center of your life? What do you love? What do you fear? What is it that shapes your choices and your responses in life?

There are lots of words you could substitute into this story of Jesus' temptation instead of “the devil.” You could talk about fear, anxiety, pain, bitterness, contempt. They're all synonyms for “the devil” and they work in our lives in the same way. They're all liars. When these are the forces at the center, the influencers which shape our choices, color our decisions, and inform our actions, then we too have yielded up our liberty to the devil, to sin and death.

But Jesus knew the devil is a liar. Jesus could see through those lies. That's why Jesus was able to resist temptation and to make his own free choices, not manipulated by the devil.

### **4 IV. Faith is the victory**

Our faith teaches us to see the realities of the world, both good and evil, and to gain the facility, the liberty, to choose our responses to the world we encounter. This is redemption, release to walk in freedom.

We spend time in prayer, we gather as church, we love and serve our neighbors, in order to gain a clearer insight into the reality of God's reign in our lives, and so to be able to better resist the devil's wiles.

We began Lent this week, 40 days of prayer, repentance, and fasting. We do these things not to earn God's favor but to cleanse our own hearts. If you're going to walk across a cow pasture in the dark, I suggest you bring a flashlight: it will help you avoid the cow patties. Even better if you can just wait until dawn, to walk by the light of the sun. So in Lent we make space for the dawn of faith in our hearts, to help us recognize the evil in the world around us, and to make our own conscious choices about it.

Jesus does not leave us alone; he was tempted as we are. But Jesus has shown us the way through temptation, and he invites you to embrace his company as he walks alongside you. That is redemption.

**Amen.**