

The Temptation of Jesus

4 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³ The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” ⁴ Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’ ”

5 Then the devil † led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And the devil † said to him, “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. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” ⁸ Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’ ”

9 Then the devil † took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰ for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ ¹¹ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’ ”

12 Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ” ¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Our gospel reading from the New Testament this morning, this first Sunday in the Church’s season of Lent, is a story which has been used at least since the fifth Century. It is found in only three of the gospels. John’s gospel doesn’t mention it at all. Mark’s gospel says very curtly in two sentences: the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness for forty days, Satan tempted him, wild beasts kept him company and angels served him. That’s it. Very basic. Matthew and Luke’s gospels go into more detail about what Satan and Jesus said to each other. Every time Satan offered Jesus more – more power, more bread, more protection, Jesus turned him down.

The stories in the bible are meant to get us thinking. They are meant to disturb our ‘grey matter’ our brain to activate. And this one accomplishes that dramatically. We have all been there. We have all been in that wilderness as individuals. We have all personally experienced what Jesus experienced. We have been offered many temptations in our lives – from juicy sweet food when we are on a diet – to opportunity to have more money than we need even if it is someone else’s’ money – to experience power and control over someone else, even if it does harm to the other person. And so on. I am certain that you have heard that sermon many times over the years.

The question we need to ask ourselves on this first few days in Lent, that season in the church’s year which precedes Easter, is, what spiritual journey will I enter into, in the next few weeks? And, I am going to make a suggestion about the path our spiritual

journey can take. And, on each of the Sundays, in my homily, I will add new steps to that path, so that it is an evolving one. The path, of course, will lead, as scripture takes us, to Easter and the liberation, the freedom that Jesus gives to us, his followers who draw near with faith.

But, first, we need to clear away the clutter which gets in the way of that journey. And that clutter is the same clutter that the devil, in our reading from Luke's gospel, tried to place in Jesus' way. They are all the 'temptations' that press on us, endlessly. Our addictions, both big and small. our endless obsessions like needing to get ahead, to be number one. Controlling our family, friends and work mates. Our need to be liked by everyone. Our dissatisfactions with our church which make us question why we stay. Our frustration with our children and their families who don't go to church. The illness which just won't heal. And so on. All those things which we want to resist, but still they persist.

All those things in our life which are unmanageable and against which we seem powerless.

There was a beloved parish priest who disappeared. It was as if he had vanished into thin air. The townsfolk searched all over and could find no trace of him. But, the following month, when the Rotary Club met, there he was sitting as usual in his favorite corner.

"Pastor," everyone cried, "where have you been?"

"I just served a thirty-day sentence in jail."

"In jail," they cried. "Pastor, you couldn't hurt a fly. What happened?"

"It is a long story," said the priest, "but, briefly, this is what happened. I was waiting at the bus stop to take the bus into Vancouver when this stunningly beautiful girl appeared on the arm of a policeman. She looked at me, turned to the cop and said, 'He did it. I am certain he is the one who did it.' Well, to tell you the truth, I was so flattered I pleaded guilty."

There are so many things which let us know that we are powerless, even vanity.

So, against all these forces that press on us endlessly, we need to admit that we are, in fact, powerless against them. And, it is hard to make that conscious decision. We must be the captains of our own ship. We must, at any cost, control our own emotions and those of our family, friends and everyone else.

Jesus said that we need to put away our arrogant 'ego'. He used the metaphor of a 'grain of wheat' or a 'branch cut off from the vine' for this. "Unless the grain of wheat falls on the ground and dies, it will remain a single grain; but if it dies, it will yield a rich harvest" (John 12:24). Paul used the metaphor of 'the flesh', meaning self-indulgence. In his epistle to the Galatians (5:19), Paul says the 'flesh' or ego cannot get you where you want to go because its concerns are too small and too selfish. The fact is that all mature

spirituality is about letting go and admitting that we are powerless, by ourselves, and we need help.

W.H. Auden in his poem *Apropos of Many Things*, wrote: “WE would rather be ruined than changed. We would rather die in our dread than climb the cross of the present and let our illusions die.”

When we admit that we are powerless against those forces that persistently constrain our lives, we need a Power greater than ourselves who can liberate us from what clutters our lives.

Richard Rohr says that to have a spiritual relationship with God, we have to have three things open within us at the same time: ‘our opinionated head, for which we need a form of contemplative or meditational practice; our closed-down-heart, for which we need a healing power in order to deal with our ‘hurts’ from the past; and, our defensive and defended body, which needs a more positive attitude. He calls this the spiritual work of ‘a Power greater than ourselves’. The work of spirituality is the ongoing liberation of head, heart, and body.

We often forget that Jesus said that WE are the light of the world also (John 5:14) and not just himself (John 8:12).

One of the things that Luke emphasizes is Jesus’ link to the ‘Holy Spirit’. Today’s gospel reading from Luke says that Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit and he was led by the Holy Spirit (4:1). The effective presence of God is offered and available to us as we seek God, that ‘Power greater than ourselves’.

Rohr writes: “All we can do is keep out of the way, note, and weep over our defensive behaviours, keep our various centers from closing down – and the Presence that is surely God is then obvious, all-embracing, and immediately effective. The immediate embrace is from God’s side, the ineffectiveness is whatever time it takes for us to “come to believe,” which is the slow and gradual healing and reconnecting of head, heart, and body so they can operate as one.”

In his first letter, the one to the Thessalonians, Paul reconnects the head, heart and body. (5:23) He wrote: “May the God of peace make you whole and holy, may you be kept safe in body, heart and mind, and thus ready for the presence. God has called you and will not fail you (1Thessalonians 5:23).”

In our spiritual journey through Lent 2016, I am suggesting that in our reflections, we need first to clear away the clutter which gets in the way of that journey. And that clutter is the same clutter that the devil, in our reading from Luke’s gospel, tried to place in Jesus’ way. They are all those things that press on our daily lives, endlessly. Isn’t it true that those things we resist the most – are the things that persist. We need to be open to God’s help if we are to be free of them. Our own impulse to control everything and be captains of our ship tends to get in the way.

Jesus reflects the power of God to heal and bring together our head, heart and body so that we may be “whole and holy”, as Paul says.

I am going to finish with a poem by Carol Bieleck, which Rohr quotes in the Preface to his book: *Breathing Underwater*. Those of you who were here on Wednesday night for the Ash Wednesday service may remember it. It is an excellent metaphor for the difficulty some of us have, trying to be ‘whole and holy’. So, I feel that it is worth repeating.

I built my house by the sea.
Not on the sands, mind you;
Not on the shifting sand
And I built it of rock.
A strong house
By a strong sea.
And we got well acquainted, the sea and I.
Good neighbours
Not that we spoke much.
We met in silences.
Respectful, keeping our distance.
But looking our thoughts across the fence of sand.
Always, the fence of sand our barrier,
Always,, the sand between.
And then one day,
-and I still don't know how it happened –
the sea came.
Without warning.
Without welcome, even
Not sudden and swift, but a shifting cross the sand like wine,
Less like the flow of water than the flow of blood.
Slow, but coming.
Slow, but flowing like an open wound.
And I thought of flight and I thought of drowning and I thought of death.
And while I thought the sea crept higher, till it reached my door.
And I knew then, there was neither flight, nor death, nor drowning.
That when the sea comes calling you stop being neighbours
Well acquainted, friendly-at-a-distance, neighbours
And you give your house for a coral castle,
And you learn to breathe underwater.

- *The Reverend Gary Hamblin*

- Source: Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water*