

Help me

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, March 13, 2011: The First Sunday in Lent.
Based on Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 and Matthew 4:1-11.*

Help me. It's the classic prayer, isn't it? Of course we heard it a few minutes ago in its elevated prose and Anglican finery: *Come quickly to help us.*

This classic and elaborated prayer asks God for something specific: *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.* And as always on this first Sunday in Lent, we're reminded of two temptation stories that have become among the best known in literature and maybe even in human history.

Both are myths, by which I mean stories which are *true without being factual*. Please hear me on that. We're dealing with truth through story.

In the myth of the garden we hear the truth about the power of human will. It's absurd to deny its truth that we are built with the will to exceed our boundaries. The ancestors of our race are given everything needful to life, and yet they reason their way to doing the one and only thing they're forbidden to do. Is there any story in the Bible that has been more deeply proven to be true?

The story of Jesus' temptation by the devil takes us even deeper, beyond the will. It's a story that goes to a level of self-awareness not known in Eden. And for the record, let's be clear that it too follows a mythic pattern: the theme that a hero or holy man was to be tested before his career or his mission began. Such stories were common in the literature of antiquity. Jesus' audiences would have known at least the drama of Abraham being tested by God's request that he prove his faith by sacrificing his only son, and the testing of Job was never far from their imagination.

And because just dealing with this story is a temptation, let's begin where many of us need to begin: inhabiting the story, conforming it to our own circumstances, cutting it down to personal size to see if we can approximate what it might feel like to be in dialogue with the Devil, and to be truly tempted.

Where my mind goes with the Jesus story is to modern day temptations.

The devil would say to me: I'll give you . . .

Freedom from spam, if you'll follow me always.

Or, he'd offer no dropped cellphone calls, and a permanent, stable and forever free superfast broadband connection.

He might really win me over by offering to restore the full value of my 401k; or better yet, forgiveness of all my debts.

Actually, the last one was good enough to make it into the Lord's Prayer, wasn't it?

So go ahead and have some fun with the story itself. But let's not stay with it at that mythic level, however useful it can be in exposing our own large and small deals with the devil.

Come with me a little farther, because there is in fact a true story behind the story of Jesus' temptation by the devil. Even those most skeptical of the factual basis of the story believe that Jesus did have a wilderness experience, a period of struggle and even suffering.

Maybe that's the takeaway here: all life involves suffering. And it likely includes temptation to be less than our best. And sadly it often means treating others as disposable. Who doesn't struggle and fall into denial when things hurt, or take short cuts, or wall oneself off from things you'd rather not think about, or prefer instant gratification or just plain gratification?

There is an ordinariness to these struggles: some seem to be trivial and others cosmic. I don't think God makes much of a distinction. The tradition of giving up something in Lent gets at the practical need we have to see and experience something ordinary, something close to us in order to gain insight—and I mean transformational insight—into the anxious, destructive and less than honest patterns we so easily fall into.

The Franciscan spiritual teacher, Richard Rohr talks about the distinction between "inner authority" and "outer authority." He observes that the noisy religious argument of this time in history is all about *outer* authority. What do you believe about that Bible, that doctrine, that Church, that authority? The call to the wilderness, the call that we are certain Jesus heeded, is the call to struggle with *inner* authority.

So, Rohr puts it this way: “Only when the two come together, inner and outer authority, do we have true spiritual wisdom. We have for too long insisted on outer authority alone, without any teaching of prayer, inner journey and maturing consciousness. The results for the world and for religion have been disastrous.” (*The Naked Now*, Crossroad Publishing: 2009; p. 86)

Arguing about an authority that you leave out there or up there, without a touching in here, absolves you from the responsibility of your actions and your beliefs.

That famous expression the early church so identified with Jesus— “*Take up your cross and follow me*”— is really an invitation to the wilderness, to the struggle with inner experience. It’s even more: a kind of demand or insistence that until you’ve wrestled with your temptations, or inner demons, or the easy ways out, you just haven’t grown up.

Frederick Buechner, the novelist and theologian, said: “To take the Devil seriously is also to take seriously man’s total and spine-tingling freedom. Lucifer was an angel who even in Paradise itself was free to get the hell out.”

So, rather than arid arguments about whether a creature like the Devil exists, our story today is a call to take the inner struggle with the Devil seriously.

St. Paul, who after all struggled very visibly and in a literary way with his experience of coming to understand who Jesus really was for him, takes this to a place that sounds a note that is often not heard in Lent. He was writing in Second Corinthians about whether to go to the Corinthian Church or the Macedonian Church.

Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to ordinary human standards, ready to say “Yes, yes” and “No, no” at the same time? As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been “Yes and No.” For the Son of God, Jesus Christ . . . it is always “Yes.” For in him every one of God’s promises is a “Yes.” 2 Cor. 1.15-20.

St. Paul is in the company of the great spiritual masters, saying that you cannot start seeing or understanding anything if you start with No. You have to start with Yes. Yes is basic acceptance of yourself of life itself and of the reality that life involves waiting—and growing. Yes means not to be so quick at labeling or analyzing or categorizing or dismissing things.

Lent then, is not so much a season of saying No to things as of honest self-denial for the sake of something deeper. Lent can be seen as a season where self-acceptance, the cosmic Yes, is the first step on the road.

I often run into people who have had too much religion, too early, and certainly too much religion of a certain kind—the No kind, the religion that always tells you what you can’t do. Such people claim that they’ve outgrown that religion. But sadly these are often people who really haven’t grown much at all, because all they’re doing is rejecting the No.

That isn’t real growth. I want to invite them into a place that says Yes. Yes to life, yes to the journey, yes to new possibilities.

When we make that invitation, what can we dare hope that they will see in us who are already here, on the journey, in the struggle? I hope they’ll see honest wrestling, the not knowing everything, but a willingness to say Yes to the struggle. Instead of saying, “I thought that always meant,” we’d say “I wonder what it means?” Instead of thinking “I’m going rise all above this,” saying, “I’m going learn to live with this right here and right now. “ Saying, “I know that every day will bring challenges and I know that change is basic to life. I don’t so much want to prevent change or wall myself off from it. I want to see what comes of it—what I can do with what already is. “

There’s an old saying that the two most important days of our lives are the day we were born and the day we know why.

Help me, goes the prayer. *Help me, God, to know why.*

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