



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
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## ***The Temptations***

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 5th, 2017*

*The First Sunday in Lent*

*Based on Matthew 4: 1-11*

*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.*

When I was a student in seminary, a notice was placed on the bulletin board. It said, "Spiritual Direction. Free."

The direction was being offered by The Society of Saint John the Evangelist—the Cowley Brothers, as they're often called. The Cowley Brothers are an Episcopal monastic order based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the monks had made a commitment to come to the seminary each quarter to meet with seminarians as a kind of monastic outreach project. Lord knows, we needed it!

The monks seemed very alien to me, with their black robes and their quiet deportment, but I didn't want to miss out on this strange opportunity, AND, it was free!

But how could a monk know anything about my life or my spiritual struggles? And then I met Brother Paul Wessinger. (More about Brother Paul in just a few moments.)

When Jesus is led out into the wilderness by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil, it's actually one of the most comprehensible episodes which take place in his entire life.

Because we have NO experience understanding "Divine Messiahship."

We have NO history with anyone who "died-on-a-cross-in-order-to-atone-for-the-sins-of-the-whole-world."

We can't even begin to imagine what it's like to discover that you're "the only begotten Son of the Father."

But what DO we know something about?

What we REALLY know something about is the temptation of evil.

In this, we can relate to Jesus, the man, because we know what it is to slide into behavior which is ultimately hurtful to ourselves and to those around us.

We know what it is to fall victim to the dark powers of this world, and we know, too, there's no shortage of temptations.

Right after God proclaims Jesus as God's son at his baptism in the River Jordan, their relationship is immediately tested in the wilderness.

The timing of this testing may appear strange but, if you think about it, an untested Messiah is of absolutely no use to us.

What good is having a God who knows nothing about the challenges human beings face day after day?

Can ANY relationship be genuine or worthwhile without a period of testing?

Isn't the depth of one's love finally and absolutely revealed when everything is on the line!?!

When everything has been risked?

Now, we are, after all, Episcopalians, and so we don't talk about the devil all that much. For Episcopalians, conversations about the devil are usually followed by brandy and cigars.

So, a brief primer may be required here....

First, we need to be quick to understand the devil is not the counter "opposite" of God. God has no opposite, no equal.

No other entity has been self-existent from the beginning of time.

Or, as a seminary professor once reminded our class over and over, "Only God can be God. Only God can be God."

The counterpart, the "peer," to the devil would be actually Michael, the Archangel.

"Dualism" is the name of that philosophy which maintains there are two equally powerful and opposite forces of good and evil locked in eternal combat over control of the universe. This is a constant theme in much contemporary evangelical Christian writing and, if you are a Star Wars aficionado, you will know it well.

However, this worldview was rejected as heretical by orthodox Christians beginning in about the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Still, there are some very well-intentioned folks who haven't received the message.

Orthodox Christianity acknowledges that a "purposeful evil" does exist in the world, but understands that the devil is overcome in and through the Paschal drama of Christ crucified and raised.<sup>i</sup>

In today's story from The Gospel According to Matthew, Satan challenges Jesus three times.... but the temptations Satan dangles in front of Jesus are proclivities which already exist within him... as they exist within all of us.<sup>ii</sup>

Henri Nouwen, in his book *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*, interprets the three encounters Jesus has with the devil as the temptation to be "relevant, spectacular, and powerful."

1. "*If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread.*"

Will Jesus become a purely political messiah; a social force in the world by feeding the hungry and by meeting the physical needs of humanity?

What a tremendous temptation! To be able to meet the material needs of the hungry children of this world.

To be completely RELEVANT to one of the obvious wounds of the world.

Yet, there is more to our existence than food.

Jesus responds to the devil's challenge by quoting Deuteronomy, "Man does not live by bread alone. but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

As high a purpose as the elimination of human suffering might be, Jesus has a still higher calling.

2. "*If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the pinnacle....*"

Amaze us, Jesus!!! Be SPECTACULAR!!!

The devil quotes Psalm 91 to provoke Jesus to exhibit a kind of false trust in God by risking himself.

Jesus fights the devil's use of scripture. (And, parenthetically, I always like to point out to those who wield their Bibles like weapons, spraying scripture round about, that even Satan knows scripture and has used scripture to deceive and seduce the people of God.)

So, Jesus matches Satan verse for verse and he, too, quotes Deuteronomy when he suggests authentic trust includes an obedience that does not attempt to force the Almighty's hand.

Instead of reveling in his power to perform miracles, Jesus reveals his authority to interpret scripture correctly.

3 Finally, Satan shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor: *“All these things I will give you if you will worship and fall down before me.”*

BE POWERFUL, JESUS!

In this temptation, we cut to the chase.

Finally, who IS God?

Who IS to be worshiped?

And this is the basic temptation of the people of Israel...

Will they place their own personal concerns and needs in the place of their desire for God? Their temptation is one of the fundamental temptations of God’s people to this very day.

What the Son refuses to receive from the devil, he ultimately achieves through his sacrifice upon the cross.

Jesus merits... Jesus has earned our worship, our love, and our adoration by giving us this gift: his life for our fractured souls. And that is relevant, spectacular and powerful enough for any of us.

Over these next forty days and six Sundays, we have an opportunity to confront the temptations that are within each of us. And some of the temptations we face aren’t ones we think of “straight away.”

When I met Brother Paul Wessinger at seminary, I didn’t know if he could appreciate where I was coming from.

But, what I appreciated about him was his gentleness and his kindness. It was later that I came to appreciate his wisdom.

I remember talking to him about a variety of Lenten disciplines I was planning to take on and all the things I was going to give up—a staggering list, as I recall, which I felt was penitential enough to put me right with The Man Upstairs.

(Now, I know what you’re thinking, and just because one’s in seminary, doesn’t mean their spirituality is particularly mature!)

And Brother Paul gently responded, “Perhaps this Lent you will want to try giving up the temptation of thinking that God doesn’t love you.”

“Dean”, he said, looking into my eyes, (and I felt he was looking right into my soul), “Do you know God loves you? Do you know it?”

And the tears began to fall down my face because for all my striving and studying, and for all my attempts at prayer and fasting and penitence and good works, great and small, I wasn’t really, truly, finally, sure.

I had succumbed to one of the deadliest temptations of them all.

Thomas Tenney writes, “Flesh cannot physically ‘catch’ God. But when the hungry heart of a God chaser cries out for God alone, those desperate cries capture God’s heart.

“At that moment, the Pursued becomes the Pursuer and the God chaser becomes a God catcher. When our prayers arrest God’s attention, God changes our future and humanity encounters divinity.”

The purpose of all our Lenten endeavors is to have God change our future and for us to “encounter divinity.”

May we place before the throne of God the hardest things, the most fractured places, the depths of our heart’s truest desires... and may we finally give up for Lent that determined temptation of believing we are not loved... and we are not loveable.

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<sup>i</sup> Synthesis, specific reference unknown

<sup>ii</sup> Synthesis, specific reference unknown