

Year C*Lent 1*2010*The Devil Said to Him
Rick Lawler

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.¹

How good it is to be in the desert with Jesus again. Every First Sunday of Lent we pray this story together. We watch Jesus being led by the Spirit;
out to the desert,
for forty days,
eating nothing at all,
famished,
and tempted.

How good it is to enter the Lenten Desert.
Not necessarily easy, or pleasant but oh, so good.

We join with Jesus,
The glory of these forty days
we celebrate with songs of praise;
for Christ through whom all things were made
himself has fasted and has prayed.

We join the saints of God,
Alone and fasting Moses saw the
loving God who gave the law;
and to Elijah, fasting, came
the steeds and chariots of flame.

So Daniel trained his mystic sight,
delivered from the lion's might;
and John, the Bridegroom's friend became,
the herald of Messiah's name.

Lent is our spiritual Olympics. The prize is the ever deepening love of God. And like any good athlete in training we are taken where the coach wants us to be, deprived of ordinary pleasures, thrown into the contest at the sound of the bell.

It is good for us to be taken where God wants us to be.
It is good to be deprived of the things that get in the way of depending on God.
It is good to be tested by the devil to prove the quality of our spiritual lives,
even if we fail the test! God knows how to redeem failure. Failure plows up our hearts and teaches us humility and dependence upon mercy.

¹*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Lk 4:1-4). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

Not an easy lesson but essential to our salvation.

(Start the point again.)

St. Jerome of Bethlehem, an irascible old Church father, wrote this prayer in praise of the desert and the desert dwelling Christians. . .

O Desert, bright with the flowers of Christ! O Solitude, whence comes the stones of which the Apocalypse, the city of the great King is built! O Wilderness, gladdened with God's special presence! What keeps you in the world, my brothers and sisters, you who are above the world? How long shall gloomy roofs oppress you? Oh, that I could behold the desert, lovelier to me than any city.

We are the flowers of the desert!
We are the ones struggling with deprivation!
We are the assaulted by many temptations from the evil one!

O God make speed to save us!

Our Lenten desert officially began four days ago on Ash Wednesday. But you might have been in the desert a lot longer than that.

Some circumstance, or loss, or change maybe, led you out into the desert like the Holy Spirit of God leading Jesus. Maybe you didn't want to go out into testing but it's not up to you. God wants to test your mettle. This is a hard thing that God does but also necessary. We must be tested as silver and gold are tried.

But take comfort, you're not alone.

We are all officially in the desert now, at least when we walk through these doors for the next forty days.

So what can we expect.

The tempter will come to each one of us and try to divert us from our intimate dependence upon God and each other. He/she/it will make suggestions, whisper lies, try to wear us down.

What will the devil say to you?
That depends on where your weaknesses are.
The devil tempts us where we are vulnerable. Look at Jesus

Jesus must have had some doubts about who he was so the devil said, "**If you are the Son of God. . .**"

Jesus was hungry for God so the devil said, "**command this stone to become a loaf of bread.**" Jesus doubted that God was filled with loving power so the devil said, "**If you will worship me, I will give you the worldly kingdoms.**"

Jesus was not sure the simple, humble, way of love was effective so the devil said to him, “throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the Temple, for it is written, ‘God will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’”²

The devil knew where Jesus was vulnerable and that’s where he made suggestions. And that is how the devil works mostly, through simple, lying, *disastrous*, suggestions.
“It’s okay if you do this.”
“You’re not really hurting anyone.”
“No one will know.”
“Who are they to tell you what to do.”
“Why don’t you try this, just once, then I will leave you alone.”
“I know it’s not good. . .but what the hell.”

We all know the voice of the tempter.

What we may not know is how cunning, baffling, and powerful the voice is.
What we may forget is that ultimately the devil is that which desires our destruction, our humiliation, our misery.

It does not matter where you locate the devil.
Whether you see it as;
a thought in your own head,
or a spirit on some invisible plain of existence.
The devil is that which does not care about your happiness and feeds on destroying God’s will in your life.

What Jesus lived to the fullest,
what the Church fathers and mothers are trying to tell us,
is that God is our greatest joy.
Loving God,
serving God,
and one day, knowing God,
is what we are made for.

As St. Augustine said (and memorize this saying if you can), “My heart was made for thee, O Lord, and I shall find no rest until I rest in thee.”

The devil wants no rest for us,
no joy,
no fun,
no pleasure,
only misery.

And the devil is that which will find where we are vulnerable,

²*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Lk 4:9-10). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

our place of pride or envy or fear or complacency,
and there it will attack us with very simple, disastrous, suggestions.

We're in the desert now and that is the place we meet the devil.

The contest is on.
And no one gets to stay on the sidelines.

So what to do?

Jesus flees to God through the Holy Scriptures'

Jesus answered him, 'It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.''³

It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'⁴

It is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'⁵

The wisdom of the Holy Scriptures, the witness of the Saints of the Church, the counsel of our own spiritual mothers and fathers, the sacraments, prayer, fasting, and self-denial, confession, our fellowship and laughter and joy, these are our weapons for the battle. These are our defense against the evil one.

Let us flee to them,
flee to the scriptures,
flee to the wise counsel of the saints,
flee to loving, prayerful, community.
Flee to God by whatever means you can,
go for a walk,
sit in meditation,
sing a song,
go to church,
come talk to me.

At the heart of these tools is a simple idea, a simple suggestion,
a simple saving thought,
trust God.

Place yourself in God's hands,
in God's heart,
in God's life,
in God's love.

Surrender yourself to the One who has **always** loved **all** creation and you with it.

³*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Lk 4:4). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

⁴*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Lk 4:8). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

⁵*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Lk 4:12-13). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

The contest is on,
the combatants, the devil and us;
the field of battle, our hearts;
the prize, the joy and bliss and pleasure and peace of being one with the Father, through the
Son, with the Holy Spirit.

Do not fear failure for our God is a loving God.
Do not imagine yourself alone in your struggle.
You are never alone. The saints and angels, all creation, your loving brothers and sisters in
Christ, are all with you.

Then grant us, Lord, like them to be
full oft in fast and prayer to thee;
our spirits strengthened with thy grace,
and give us joy to see thy face.

O Father, Son, and Spirit blest,
to thee be every prayer addressed,
who art in threefold Name adored,
from age to age, the only Lord.
(Latin 6th cent.; tr. Maurice F. Bell (1862-1947))