

## 1 Lent, Year C: 17 February 2013

This morning's Gospel begins with an incredible contrast. Remember that in the Lukan account, this passage follows the baptism of Jesus. Now we hear that Jesus, who has just been *filled* with the Holy Spirit, is led by that same Spirit into the *emptiness* of the wilderness. The Marcan account actually says the Spirit *drove* him into the wilderness. Whatever happened, he quickly goes from one extreme experience to another.

The Middle Eastern wilderness is a vast and harsh place: rocky, desolate, and dry. It could be a frightening place for a person alone, a place where you would really have to do battle physically and emotionally just to survive in that rough environment. Jesus is in this wilderness very much alone: no human companionship, no food. Today's version of the story says that he ate nothing at all for 40 days. No wonder he had visions.

This is one of those stories in Scripture that almost immediately recalls a movie scene. You know, from one of those awful Hollywood Bible movies with the devil looking very much like a human dragon with horns and a tail, taking Jesus, who really doesn't look the worse for wear after 40 days of no food, on fantastic journeys. This devil wants Jesus to play the magician, to turn stones into bread. He offers Jesus ultimate power over all the kingdoms of the world. He takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem and says, "Throw yourself down, your angels will catch you." No one in Jerusalem would have trouble believing Jesus was the son of God if they had seen him carried by angels from the top of the temple!

These are very vivid images, but we might be tempted to think, "What a great story and didn't Jesus give very clever answers, but what could this passage really say to me?" We might be tempted to wonder if *we're* ever really *full* of the Holy Spirit, and we might not be able to imagine *ever* being offered a look at all the kingdoms of the world in an instant. So, what does this passage have to offer *us*?

Actually, quite a lot. The realities of fullness and emptiness, experiences of grace and of testing, are very much a part of all our lives. Jesus' wilderness experience wasn't a Hollywood movie scene; it was an intensely personal time of soul-searching, of discernment about vocation and mission.

Bear with me for a small textual discursion here.

The Greek word *diabolos*, which we translate here as “devil,” is a replacement for the original Hebrew word *satan*, from which we get Satan. In its earliest use, this Hebrew word simply meant an adversary, and it was used this way throughout the Hebrew scriptures: the angel of the Lord is the *satan* who stands in Balaam’s way; the Philistines fear that David may turn out to be their *satan*; Solomon declares that God has given him such peace and prosperity that he has no *satan* left to oppose him. You get the picture.

Later on the word took on a slightly darker slant.

In the Hebrew writings that come closest to Jesus’ day, Satan—now a personification, capital “S”—serves as a kind of prosecuting attorney in the divine courtroom; he attempts to undermine the faithful testimony and confidence of human beings, and he weighs their case as they stand in the presence of the Almighty. This is the way Satan appears in the Book of Job and in the writings of the prophet Zechariah. And please note that while this Satan is portrayed as an adversary of humankind, he is very much working as an agent of God.

Only very late in the game, as Hebrew thought took on some of the cosmic dualism of Hellenistic philosophy—light versus dark, good versus evil, spirit versus matter—which is a very false and un-Jewish splitting of one reality into artificial, opposing categories: only then does the myth have Satan become the powerful adversary of *God’s own self*, the darkness that attempts to overcome the light, the essence of everything that is against God.

It is in this latter context that the early converts to Christianity would have understood the Lukan account of Jesus tested by Satan. Jesus struggles with his adversary, a mighty power that operates against God and will try anything to thwart God’s plan for the world, and he prevails. Most of us know this struggle, too, although on a more personal and less cosmic level. There are forces all around us that we might well call satanic, that would lure us from being our best selves and thwart God’s purpose for our lives, powers that constantly test our resolve and our faith. And it happens on the corporate level as much as on the personal. We have experienced this as a country; you have experienced it as a community of faith.

This past year has been one of discernment, of soul-searching, of fullness and emptiness, of grace and testing. It has not always been easy and it has not always been pleasant. Nor is it really over: you can't just point to the discovery team profile and say "There. Whew. Thank goodness they're done with that. Now let's just get on with it." You are living in a new world now, on the other side of the wilderness experience, and things can never return to the way they were before. The question is: with what knowledge have you emerged and how will you use it? Do you have a renewed sense of God-given vocation and mission? Do you know what it is that tempts you from being your best self and do you know what work you must do to overcome it? If we are honest, the work is *always* there before us; there is always more we can do to realize more completely who it is God is calling us to be. As individuals or as a community.

But we know that we can prevail in this struggle because we have Jesus' example before us, and in him is our strength. Taking Jesus as our model, we can use these wilderness times to go deep inside ourselves, quietly and reflectively, so that we can confront our temptations and rid ourselves of whatever it is that makes us act contrary to the promises we made at our baptism. Liturgically that's why we have this season of Lent, why it begins with the deep self-reflection of Ash Wednesday.

It's not always easy. It's never easy to admit our failings. It's often even harder to repent and begin anew. But we find the good news in the two verses that bookend today's passage. Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit did not leave him to face the desert alone. We are also filled with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit does not leave us when the going gets rough either. She goes with us into the desert, helps us confront the hard times, and supports us as we turn again to living the life God calls us to live.

All things are possible for those who believe.