

“Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.”
(St. Matthew 4.10, quoting Deuteronomy 6.13)

This week, we find ourselves at the beginning of our Lenten Journey. We have received our ashes, figuratively put on our sackcloth, and now we start the work of preparation. And this work of preparation, as said in the exhortation from Ash Wednesday, involves several aspects including self-examination, repentance, prayer, fasting, self-denial, and the reading and meditation upon God’s Holy Word. It is only fitting, then, that our lessons this week focus us on themes of the interaction of temptation and God’s grace.

Our Old Testament and Gospel lessons, particularly, contrast for us two different responses to temptation. In Genesis, we have the episode known as “the Fall” – where Adam and Eve fall into Sin by the temptation of the serpent to eat the forbidden fruit. We know the story: the serpent misquotes God to Eve to plant a seed of doubt in God’s command not to eat of one tree. Eve succumbs to the serpent’s suggestions and then has Adam eat of the tree as well. They were promised to be more like God and learn the difference between Good and Evil. Ironically, though, Adam and Eve were already far more like God than the serpent since they were made in God’s image. The only knowledge they learned after eating the fruit of the tree was knowledge that they were naked: knowledge that they had disobeyed God. This temptation broke their relationship with God, for it dissolved the trust that God placed in them to be caretakers of his creation and rule over all the beasts that were in it. Adam and Eve were supposed to rule over the serpent, but instead the serpent supplants their authority with half-truths and deception.

This first temptation leads to the curses that God pronounced upon the snake, the woman, and the man (which we heard a few weeks ago). The order which God set out at creation was subverted. Things were not as they were supposed to be, for evil had entered into God’s perfect creation. At the end of the creation story, God proclaims that it was “very good”, and now his creation was entering into open rebellion against him. What a sad state of affairs this is. But this first sin of Adam and Eve, descended to us as our “original sin” that we inherit from the time of our birth, lays the foundation stone for our need of atonement – our need to be saved.

Our salvation, of course, which is in the form of the man, Jesus Christ. In the Gospel, St. Matthew follows the telling of Jesus’ baptism immediately with the story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness where he resists the devil’s temptations and prevails against him. It is a trial steeped in symbolism: Jesus was in the desert for forty days and forty nights, driven out by the Spirit of God. This period of forty days is reminiscent of the 40 years the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness before they could enter into the promised land, where they were forced to rely on God for provision and sustenance. It is reminiscent of the three times that Moses fasted for forty days and nights upon the mountain top before and after receiving the 10 Commandments (Exodus 34.28). It is reminiscent of Elijah fasting for forty days and nights on his journey to Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19.8). The connections with these passages seem to be deliberate, for Jesus’ responses to each of the three temptations are quotations of Deuteronomy, which takes place during Israel’s desert wandering. And we cannot overlook the fact that at the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus is proclaimed to be the fulfillment of both the Law and the Prophets and appears there with Moses and Elijah – the embodiment of each.

Like most of the Gospels, this story is making bold statements about the identity of Jesus. But these symbolic connections aside, the meat of the story is in the temptations and their rebuttals. Hungry and weak Jesus is offered food, which he rejects. He is tempted to jump off

the highest point of the temple to prove that he is the Son of God, since the angels will most certainly be sent to his rescue. And he is tempted to be given all the kingdoms of the world simply for worshipping him. If the tempter truly believed that Jesus was the Son of God, he should have known that these attempts wouldn't have worked, but for the sake of proving Jesus' identity, we can see that they *didn't* work.

The contrast that we have, then, between Adam's sin and Jesus' temptation is stark. One fell at the first suggestion, and the other prevailed despite three significant attempts. This observation was a well-known teaching point to the early Church Fathers – the theologians of the first few hundred years after Jesus' death. They latched onto the idea that Jesus was the "New Adam", following the example of St. Paul in the Epistle to the Romans, where he says "just as through the disobedience of one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5.19). Jesus was the New Adam who succeeds where the first Adam failed. Christ undoes the wrong that leads to death and leads humanity towards Eternal life. Christ's victory over the devil at his temptation was the first major victory in the cosmic battle between the forces of God and the forces of evil. And in celebration, the angels fed and ministered to Jesus to recuperate him after his forty days in the wilderness. The time had now begun to spread the good news of God's kingdom on earth.

But, of course, we ourselves are just beginning our own 40-day journey in the desert of Lent. How are we supposed to be like Jesus and resist the temptations of the Devil? Are we not as easily swayed as Adam and Eve, liable to fall at the first wind of temptation? While that may be our nature, St. Paul's Epistle gives us a hint as to how we too can overcome these trials. It is only by great endurance and the endless Grace of God (which Paul himself knows all too well is completely transformative) that we can outlast the things that strive to tear us down. Through the sacrifice of Jesus, we have been granted access to these endless gifts which now flow freely to us through the Holy Spirit, and so the full power of God to hold out from attacks is at our disposal. We are armed with the full armour of righteousness (2 Cor. 6.7; c.f. Eph. 6.10-18) and are supported through every trial and temptation when we call upon the name of the Lord. Without him, we are just as easily defeated as the first Adam, but with the aid of the New Adam, we are defended.

The first few weeks of Lent serve to warn us some of the dangers we will encounter on the road of faith, and today's is the danger of temptation. Evil is the absence of God – that which is opposite of God – so to succumb to temptation is to abandon God. But thanks be to God that his Son, Jesus, has taken away the sting of sin and death, so that the sins of the old Adam will no longer be borne by us when we sit before the judgement seat of God. We must do our part to entrust ourselves to his protection and care so that he may be our defence in moments of peril and the cause of our endurance to run the race that is set before us.

This Lenten season, as we combat the forces of temptation which aim to take us away from the presence of God, may we be emboldened and strengthened by the presence of the New Adam who is at work in us all by the Grace of God. As we journey to the cross, we give thanks that the sin of the first Adam has been redeemed. And we give thanks that through Christ we may be presented spotless before the judgement seat of God at end of the age.