

Welcome to Lent

Seldom do we get such richness in Scripture
two of the most powerful and evocative stories in the Bible
on the same day.

And when it comes to stories about temptation,
these readings cover just about everything.

First is that wonderful account of Adam and Eve
and their problems in the garden.

Here they are, in paradise, everything's going just great,
and along comes this lousy snake
with a smooth line and some new ideas.

Next thing you know, temptation triumphs, paradise is history,
all is lost, and the man and the woman are left
with fig leaves, regrets, and a sour after-taste.

Then, in a powerful contrast,

Jesus is driven from his baptism into the wilderness
which is just about as far from paradise as you can get.

There, unlike Adam and Eve

(who were surrounded by ease and plenty),

Jesus has nothing; he is exhausted, starving, weak, and alone
as he struggles with his time of temptation and challenge.

The two stories form such an obvious contrast

that it's impossible not to compare them,

and to look for what emerges when they are taken together.

On one level it looks simple enough:
Jesus is the winner, and Adam and Eve are the losers;
they are weak and he is strong.
So, you might conclude,
it's better to be like Jesus than like Adam and Eve.

What's more, since today is the First Sunday in Lent,
there is the added point
that Lent is supposed to make us stronger
so we will be more like Jesus than like Adam and Eve
at least as far as such things as *temptations* are concerned.

And that's *almost* right.
There really is such a thing
as being more or less in shape spiritually,
such a thing as being more or less able
to handle the demands of a serious Christian life.
This has to do with character,
and with the development of virtues, or habits.

Doubtless, the disciplined rigor of a holy Lent can take us several
important steps in a good direction.
The spiritual "muscles"
again, really just habits
we develop with disciplines like a Lenten rule
are exactly the same ones we use in daily life,
when the decisions we make can have serious consequences.

And don't forget,
what makes the story of Adam and Eve a *true* story
is not simply that it describes something
that happened somewhere else a long time ago
that's not what's at issue here.

One way the story of Adam and Eve is a true story
is that it describes exactly what life is like here and now.

It tells the truth, not about them, but about us.

And over and over again, we find ourselves just like them.

We are forced to decide what to do with something
which, on the one hand, looks really good
something that seems useful and popular,
and just might teach us a thing or two

but which, on the other hand,
we strongly suspect is not what God,
and our better selves, think best for us.

And we must choose.

When that happens,
we might well find that it is better to be stronger,
to have developed some of those spiritual habits
that help us to choose in the right direction.

So there is a real value to the familiar notion
that we all need to buff up a bit,
and that Lent is a good opportunity for doing this,
or to begin doing it.

At the same time,
there are also some risks to coming at things this way,
as useful as it might seem.

For one thing,
all this talk of getting into shape
can lead to the sort of macho spirituality
exemplified by the young monk
who bragged that he could fast any man in the monastery
right under the table
which sort of misses the point of spiritual growth.
For another,
we can fall into a mistaken idea of what victory is really all about.

Notice again what's going on in Jesus' temptation.
He has fasted and prayed for a long time, f
or long enough to get the job done
(that's what "forty days" means)... and he's famished.
He's exhausted, worn out, beat up from the weather
and the loneliness and the effort it takes to sustain something like this.

He's not at his best; he's not bursting
with physical or spiritual or any other sort of strength.
He's used all that up by just making it to where he is
by just being faithful to the fast.
And this is when the temptations hit Jesus.

Now, I suspect that if the tempter had caught him on a good day,
Jesus would have had all sorts of answers of his own
to the devil's three challenges—to the temptations—he was given.

He might have told wonderful parables
or asked clever and insightful questions right back at him
and put the devil on the spot.
But strength and energy and cleverness were all gone.
There weren't any left.

We know about this, too
and this is a different sort of temptation
from the one Adam and Eve faced.
This story models times
when we face strong, or compelling, or addicting,
or beautiful, or just plain hard temptations
and we have flat run out of resources to resist them.

No matter how strong we were to start with,
we simply can't any longer move in the direction we want,
and we are drawn instead along lines defined against our will,
by our appetites and our ego.

It's not just a matter of not being strong enough;
it's a matter of being empty.
That's where Jesus was
he was famished;
he was out of gas;
and he was tempted, really tempted.

Look at what happens:
Jesus does not say one word of his own.
Instead, he quotes scripture in a simple and straightforward way
that is quite unlike how he uses the Bible
almost everywhere else in the Gospels.

Jesus has no words, no resistance, no strength of his own
he's simply holding on to the Father,
and letting the Father's words,
and the Father's mind,
come through him.

Jesus' response to the tempter is not a victory
of personal, spiritual strength
in some sort of holy temptation-lifting Olympics.
Instead, his victory is the gift of grace
that comes from surrender.

Doubtless his time in the wilderness
gave Jesus a stronger and more disciplined relationship
with the Father.

(And, as a human being,
Jesus paid attention to such matters,
just like we do.)

But it also gave him something else, something more,
something we see emerging in this story of his temptations.

His time in the wilderness gave Jesus the insight and the courage
to surrender,
and so to depend not on his own best efforts,
but on an emptiness that can only be filled by the Father,
and that can only be filled by a gift of grace.

Jesus... didn't complain... He prayed.

Adam didn't surrender to God...

"The woman **you** gave to be with me—she gave me some fruit"

He complained

And Eve didn't surrender to God...

"The serpent deceived me, and I ate"

She Complained

That's one reason why Lent is so important for us

This time set aside... to open our hearts to God.

To step away from the constant complaining that surrounds us

To take breath... to breathe in the Presence of God.

James Altucher wrote...

Complaining is draining.

Complaining only takes away energy from today

and never solves the problems for tomorrow.

Want to open your hearts to experience the Presence of God?

Then cast out the negative thoughts

that ***block The Presence of God*** from filling your heart.

First step... is to recognize the negative thought for what it is...

Second... ask yourself... ***Where is this coming from?***

Third... identify the source...

If it's not about Love... It's not about Jesus...

Especially when people justify their complaints... with Holy Scripture

Genocide is biblical

Loving your neighbor is biblical

But only one is Christlike

Slavery is biblical

Chain breaking is biblical

But only one is Christlike

Patriarchy is biblical

Counter cultural elevation of women is biblical

But only one is Christlike

Retributive violence is biblical

Grace filled restoration is biblical

But only one is Christlike

Segregation is biblical

Unity is biblical

But only one is Christlike

Christ transforms... not the Bible...

Be wary of those who know one... But not the other!

Fourth... slowly... breathe in ***the Breath of God***

Breathe in through your nose... slowly... then hold it...

Then breathe out through your mouth... as if blowing through a straw

Repeat it several times... keeping you eyes closed... each time slower.

Fifth... ***Reset your mind...*** by remembering... a moment...

A beautiful sunset... a laughing child... falling in love...

Then... Savor the Wonder and the Joy of that moment...

Let it re-fill the space in your heart you've just re-opened...

And pray...

Barbara has a seven-year-old granddaughter named Madeline.
When she comes to visit, they cook together.
Their most successful dishes?
mashed sweet potatoes with lots of butter
and crescent dinner rolls made from scratch.
From the day Madeline was born,
They've been able to look each other straight in the eye
with no sentimentality whatsoever.
The tartness of our love for one another continues to surprise her.
It is easy to forget she is seven years old.

Her first indication of gaps in her religious education came
when her mother, grandfather and I
joined hands around the dinner table and bowed our heads to pray.

"Why is granddaddy talking with his eyes shut?"

"Just be quiet and listen," not a bad introduction to prayer.

Last May Madeline came to celebrate her birthday.
Madeline watched the candles on her cake while they sang to her.
Then she leaned over to blow them out *without* making a wish.
"Aren't you going to make a wish?" her mother asked.
"You have to make a wish," her grandfather said.
Madeline looked as if someone had just run over her cat.

I don't know why I keep doing this, she said to no one in particular.
Doing what? Barbara asked.

This wishing thing, she said, looking at the empty chair at the table.

Last year I wished my best friend wouldn't move away but she did.

*Now I want to wish my mommy and daddy would get back together
That's not going to happen*, her mother said.

I know it's not going to happen, so why do I keep doing this?

No one answered her.

It would have been insulting, under the circumstances,
since her question was better than any response we could have given.
Why do any of us keep wishing for things we know won't happen?

Why do we keep tossing the coins
of our hearts' desires into pools of still water
that swallow them up without a sound?

If Barbara had been prepared, she might have said something inspired
about the difference between wishing and prayer,
but she wasn't prepared.

When Barbara would talk to Madeline about prayer
she wanted to tell her the truth about what she can expect.
She want to say something she can test for herself
about how God loves her and listens to her...
but in that case... she'd need a ready explanation
for why it does not always seem so.

She'd skip the usual stuff about how no is a valid answer to prayer.
As true as that may be, it sounds stingy.

Even Jesus thought it sounded stingy.

***"Is there anyone among you who,
if your child asks for bread, will give a stone?" (Matt. 7:9).***

She also wanted to stay away from the stuff
about how she should only ask for what accords with God's will.

***Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain,
'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,'
and if you do not doubt in your heart,
but believe that what you say will come to pass,
it will be done for you (Mark 11:23).***

Surely there are prayer requests more central to God's will
than rearranging the landscape.

What Barbara wanted for Madeline
was to know is the best thing about prayer is the relationship itself.
Whether or not she gets what she asks for...
She wants her to keep asking.
She wants her to pester God the same way she pesters her mother...
thinking of 12 different ways to plead her case.
She wants her to long for God the same way she longs for her father...
holding fast to him even when his chair is empty.

When she complains that none of this does any good,
Barbara will ask her...
about the difference between how she feels while she is praying
versus how she feels when she thinks about giving up.

If she's lucky,
Madeline will tell her she feels more alive when she is praying,
and that's when She'll tell her about the persistent widow
that loud-mouthed woman who bothered the unjust judge
until he gave her what she wanted.

*And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones
who cry to him day and night?
Will he delay long in helping them?"* (Luke 18:7)

Well, yes, he might.
I am willing to concede that much.
But there is more to prayer than the answer to prayer.
There is also the pray-er, who is shaped by the praying.
What the persistent widow knows
is that the most important time to pray
is when your prayers seem meaningless.
If you do not go yell under the judge's window,
what are you going to do?
Take to your bed with a box of Kleenex?
Forget what matters to you altogether?
No.
Every day of your life, you are going to get up, wash your face,
and go ask for what you want.
You are going to trust the process, regardless of what comes of it,
because the process itself gives you life.

One day,
when Madeline asks Barbara outright whether prayer really works,
She will say,

Oh, sweetie, of course it does.

It keeps our hearts chasing after God's heart.

It's how we bother God, and how God bothers us back.

There's nothing that works any better than that.

Jesus said to his disciples:

When you are handed over to your enemies,

***do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say
for what you are to say will be given to you at that time.***

It's fair to suspect that, when he said this,

Jesus could taste the dust of the desert

and hear again the voice of the tempter.

He could remember that hunger that reached out greedily
even to the stones around him.

He knew what he was talking about.

At the end of the day, the spiritual life is never about us,
about what we can and cannot do.

At the end of the day, it is always about God,

and about God's gifts

gifts of grace, gifts that do not fail.