

Facing our addictions in Lent

THE GOOD NEWS

GOD'S WORD IN EVERYDAY LIVING

By Father Paul Turner



THE FORTY-DAYS of Lent take their inspiration from the 40 days Jesus spent in the desert facing the temptations of the devil. Lent remains a season in which the Church invites us to face our addictions, our faults, our selfishness, and our pride. Christians have found that these six weeks offer an outstanding opportunity for spiritual growth.

The first Sunday of Lent always carries the Gospel of the temptation of Christ. Originally there were two separate traditions about this Gospel. One tradition kept it in the chronological sequence of the Christmas cycle. Thus, after the feast of the baptism of the Lord, some in the Church celebrated his temptation. It made sense since that's the sequence of the stories in the Bible.

However, another tradition put this text at the beginning of Lent, and that's the tradition that eventually won out in the Roman rite. Lent originated because of the catechumenate. Those who were preparing for baptism at Easter underwent a period of intense preparation, complete with fasting. It was the catechumen's fast that inspired the Church to begin the season of Lent with the story of Jesus' fast. Throughout the season, catechumens celebrated scrutinies, prayers in which the community asked that whatever temptations they faced would be driven away, just as Jesus drove away the temptations during his forty days of preparation.

GRADUALLY, the whole Christian community recognized that catechumens had a good thing going. Thus even those already baptized began to take on a 40-day fast as a time of spiritual renewal, making Lent a retreat for the whole Church.

The 40 days typically remind us of the 40 years that Israel wandered in the wilderness (Deut 8:2). Not only does the magic number line up, but we read in the same passage the reason that God led

Israel there: "In order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments." The same explanation fits the trial of Jesus, the preparation of catechumens, and the spiritual renewal of the faithful.

There were other periods of similar length: Moses fasted 40 days before writing the 10 commandments (Ex 34:28). Elijah the prophet wandered 40 days without food before meeting God at Horeb (1 Kings 19:8). The number signifies a completion, and the length of days indicates a period long enough to change habits, or to sink deeply within.

This year we hear Luke's version of the temptation (4:1-13). Only he and Matthew give us an extended account of the event. It's likely that Mark didn't have access to this same material, and that John chose not to use it.

INTERESTINGLY, Luke inserts a section between the baptism of Jesus and the temptation in the desert -- the genealogy of Jesus. Matthew's version of that family tree surfaces in the liturgy every Advent, to the horror of most deacons and priests called on to read it. Luke gives his genealogy in reverse. Matthew started with Abraham and worked his way to Jesus. Luke starts with Jesus and goes back to Abraham and then some -- clear to Adam, the son of God.

Although next Sunday's reading mercifully spares us the long list of names, it sadly keeps us from noting a connection that Luke makes. By taking his genealogy in reverse, Luke mentions the name of Adam in the verse before the temptation of Christ. Thus in two neat verses, the reader remembers the devil's successful temptation of Adam, even as the unsuccessful temptation of Jesus begins.

This Gospel is not so much about temptation. It's about victory. Jesus overcomes the power of the devil from the very beginning, though he will continue the conflict throughout the rest of the Gospel, all the way to the cross. At the end of this text, Luke tells us ominously that the devil departed "until an opportune time." Later (22:3) we'll hear that Satan entered into Judas Iscariot. Yet even this final battle would bring the defeat of evil.

Lent will bring many of us to penance; but it also pledges victory.

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Daily Scripture Readings

Eighth Sunday

In Ordinary Time
Sunday, February 26
Sirach 27:4-7
Psalms 92:2-3, 13-16
1 Corinthians 15:54-58
Luke 6:39-45

Monday, February 27

Sirach 17:19-24
Psalms 32:1-2, 5-7
Mark 10:17-27

Tuesday, February 28

Sirach 35:1-12
Psalms 50:5-8, 14, 23
Mark 10:28-31

Ash Wednesday

Wednesday, March 1
Joel 2:12-18
Psalms 51:3-6, 12-14, 17
2 Corinthians 5:20 - 6:2
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Thursday, March 2

Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Psalms 1:1-4, 6
Luke 9:22-25

Friday, March 3

Isaiah 58:1-9a
Psalms 51:3-6, 18-19
Matthew 9:14-15

Saturday, March 4

Isaiah 58:9b-14
Psalms 86:1-6
Luke 5:27-32

First Sunday of Lent

Sunday, March 5
Deuteronomy 26:4-10
Psalms 91:1-2, 10-15
Romans 10:8-13
Luke 4:1-13

