

Sunday: Lent I, Cycle C, 2.14.16
 Scripture: Deut 26:4-10/Rom 10:8-13/Lk 4:1-13

A TESTING OF FAITH; A VICTORY OF GRACE

While I was in Washington DC a couple weeks ago, I had a chance to explore some of the Smithsonian Museums. I ended up going back twice to the National Museum of the American Indian. The special exhibit that caught my interest was a display of the art of Kay Walkingstick.



Born in Syracuse, New York, this artist was the daughter of a Scottish-Irish mother, but her father was a member of a distinguished Cherokee family from Oklahoma. When her mother was pregnant with Kay, she left her husband because of alcoholism. As a result, Kay had little familiarity with her Cherokee background except for the things she learned from her older siblings and the Indian stories her mother told her about her handsome father. Kay felt cut off from one half of her heritage and her desire for integration and wholeness initiated a time of searching. One of Kay's early works was entitled "Messages to Papa." In this teepee creation she incorporated a Cherokee language translation of the "Lord's Prayer" and a letter to her deceased father, pursuing -- through her art -- that journey which many of us have made to connect with a distant or estranged father. I shared that struggle and resonated with her provocative piece.

Most engaging for me, however, among her many haunting yet alluring landscape scenes, was a style for which she has best become known -- the use of "diptychs." These are two-paneled works of art. Each panel, while unique in itself, both contrasts and balances its partner -- in color and theme, in mood and form.



Like the two cultures that formed the artist's life, her juxtaposed panels inform each other, while posing questions and calling for a second look, a deeper understanding. Today, on this First Sunday of Lent, the Word of God paints for us a diptych, a two-paneled canvas, that invites us to take a second look and come to a deeper understanding of who Jesus is and what he is calling us to be as his followers. Lent urges us to look into the history of our lives to find the truth of who we are and how we are to cooperate with the Spirit to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth.

No sooner had Jesus been baptized in the Jordan and affirmed by the Spirit as God's beloved child, the Spirit now leads him into the desert, a desert within and without -- that place of dryness and desolation, where things are uncertain and the next steps are unsure. How many times each of us experienced those days when the rains pour down and the waves start crashing and we wonder how long we'll stay afloat? days when life is as dry as a desert and our spirits ache like an empty stomach? On one side of our scriptural painting stands Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man. On the other side is the Tempter, trying to turn Jesus away from his mission, hoping to

seduce him into following his own guidance and power. During this lonely and difficult time, Jesus must come to terms with the life that lay before him.

The 13th century Italian artist Duccio pictures for us the struggle Jesus endured.



In a drama of three acts, Satan presents Jesus with three temptations that we each confront. *Turn these stones into bread. Use your power to satisfy yourself!* In our world of excessive appetites for pleasure and satisfaction, we so easily give in to temptation. Jesus, whose food was to do the will of the Father, would not succumb. Instead he gives himself to us as the Bread of Life, the food that nourishes the hungers of the human family. Satan challenges Jesus again: *Accept the power and glory that I can give you in this world. Just worship me!* The seduction is so frequent for us to make gods out of the things of this world. Jesus shows himself to be faithful to the one true God. He is the model of single-hearted faith for each believer. He will not compromise the values of God to accommodate the values of the world. Finally, in Act III of the drama, Satan attempts to weaken Jesus' resolve – cajoling him to test his Heavenly Father, to make God in his own image. Our temptation is to put God to the test rather than to live peacefully with God's plan as it unfolds within and around us. Jesus stood his

ground; he trusted absolutely and would not test God. He will be what God has called him to be.

Jesus faced these temptations and did this -- all of this -- for us, so we'd never forget that God sees every line of worry that crosses our face, knows every doubt that clouds our vision, feels the fear that makes us anxious. In Christ Jesus, God became one of us so that we might become one with God. The Letter to the Hebrews reminds us so forcefully when it speaks of Jesus, our High Priest: *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin.*

One particular painting in Kay Walkingstick's exhibit offered a key to my Lenten Season. It comes from a series she entitled "Painting from Paintings," in which the artist took an element or a feature from a famous classical painting which she had seen or studied during her time in Italy, in this case the Devil from Duccio's "Temptation of Christ," and incorporated it into her own work.



There on the right panel is the Tempter, Satan – a loathsome figure who disrupts and tears apart. He tries to convince us to let the end justify the means – a temptation to which Jesus would not yield, but which too often we do.

Here the Evil One is contrasted with the bright color and harmonious design of the left panel. Lent offers us a choice as does each day of life. Will we give ourselves over to God and open our hearts to the grace that can transform us and our world? Or will we be tempted to give in and give up because the journey is challenging and the road is long?

The artist's answer came in another painting which was not in her exhibit at the gallery in Washington, but which she graciously sent me via email only yesterday.



There, on the left panel, is the desert and the mountain top. And on the right of the diptych is the Devil again in all his darkness. And there are the feet of Jesus – a victorious Jesus trampling underfoot all the powers of darkness and bringing the light of peace, joy and love to all who follow in His Way. May these forty days of Lent find us walking his path and sharing his victory.

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