

As I think many of us know, Lent always begins with Jesus' temptation in the wilderness on the First Sunday of Lent, followed by his Transfiguration on the Second Sunday of Lent. This is sort of like a road map, showing us where we are now and where we are trying to go. We are in the desert of temptation preparing to go on a journey to a mountaintop encounter with our Lord, first at Easter and then, hopefully in heaven. Whenever I take a trip, I prefer the backroads and adventure routes with many detours down side trails so hang on because we might be doing some of that this year.

Today we are just going to look at Jesus' first temptation: "If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread." It seems to me that someone else's first temptation involved food. Where did I hear that? Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Let's compare those two battles against the devil.

Adam and Eve lived in a garden full of trees bearing fruit that was good to eat. There is no evidence that they were hungry. Yet the devil comes along in the disguise of a serpent and draws their attention to the one tree whose fruit they cannot eat. This wasn't an arbitrary rule. "Knowledge" in the bible often meant to "experience" something. God did not want Adam and Eve to experience good and evil in this way. First, he doesn't want anything bad for us and second, he knew that if we experienced it then we would want to control it and decide for ourselves what is right and wrong. How has that worked out for us? The devil did his work by causing Eve to doubt God's word: "Did God really say you would die if you eat that fruit? You won't die."

Eve's response to the serpent's question is interesting: "'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; it is only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, 'You shall not eat it or even touch it, lest you die.'" God didn't actually say "don't touch the fruit." He just said "don't eat it." Eve's response can be understood in both positive and negative ways. On the positive side, perhaps she intuitively understood that touching often leads to going too far. Also, it can be understood as fighting back against the devil by restating the commandment and adding to it for emphasis. Adding to the commandment, though, is where the negative side comes in. It is written, do not add to or subtract from any of these words. Eve's addition can be understood as the human tendency to add to God's laws. This will be one of the sources of conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees; many will argue that we have the same problem today.

The final understanding of Eve's response is in line with the way we often overreact to or exaggerate things we don't like. For example we say things like: "you always do that! You never let us have any fun!" God says "Don't eat from that tree; Eve responds (in a whiny tone) with "God won't even let us touch that tree or we'll die." If this last interpretation is correct, it could indicate that in spite of all God had given to Adam and Eve, they wanted the one thing they couldn't have. The sins of pride, disobedience, and lack of trust in God may very well have been rooted in ingratitude. The liturgy backs this up. Almost every week we hear during the Mass: "it is truly right and just, always and everywhere to give you thanks, Lord almighty God." Perhaps we are reminded of the need for gratitude because since the beginning we have had a tendency to be ungrateful.

Now for Jesus' temptation. He was in a desert, not a garden. He had fasted for forty days and nights and Matthew specifically tells us he was hungry. Once again, here comes the devil with pretty much the same tactic, trying to get someone to eat. As the Son of God, through whom all things were made, Jesus could have turned the stones into bread and eaten them, but he refused to use that power. Why? Why was Jesus in the desert? This is from Saint Augustine: "Jesus made himself one with us when he chose to be tempted by Satan...Certainly Christ was tempted by the devil...He could have kept the devil from himself; but if he were not tempted he could not teach you how to triumph over temptation." In other words, Jesus was out there to refight and win the battle Adam and Eve lost and in the process teach us lessons for how we can fight the devil. The best thing we can do when Satan comes prowling around is say: Get away Satan! And ask Jesus, his mom, and Saint Joseph to help us to chase the devil away.

Here at the beginning of Lent, we also are in that desert—or could it be a garden—struggling with temptation. Whose voice are we going to listen to? The devil's voice, which encourages us to seize that which belongs to God and decide for ourselves what is right and wrong, good or evil? Or will we rely upon the word of God and learn from Jesus how to fight against the devil's lies? Like Adam and Eve, are we focused on that which we can't have or don't have? Or are we grateful for what has been given to us, often at great cost? If we need to be reminded of the costs associated with the many blessings we have received, or need to be reminded to say thank you, all we have to do is look at Jesus hanging upon the cross. Let our prayer constantly be: "Thank you Lord Jesus."