

First Sunday in Lent ~ March 5, 2017

Sermon preached by the Rev. Daniel Vélez Rivera

Readings: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7, Psalm 32, Romans 5:12-19, Matthew 4:1-11

The verses immediately preceding today's lesson from Matthew's gospel describe the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan. Whether the temptation of Jesus immediately followed his Baptism or not is of little consequence, what is important however is that before Jesus was confronted by Satan in the wilderness, and before he sojourned to the cross, God blessed him, claimed him, and consecrated him. God said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased."

The affirmation from the Father has been important and relevant to all of human creation throughout history and relevant for us today. Being blessed, claimed and consecrated has a profound effect on those who accept it. If you ever doubt whose you are or question why you are part of the kingdom of God, please remember God's holy claim, "You are my child, my beloved, in you I am well pleased." We may ask at times why our lives don't go as we plan, why we sacrifice so much, for what outcome or for what purpose we are here on Earth. We may wonder why the suffering, why the anger, why the persecution, why the uncertainty, why, why, why? Jesus didn't have to ask questions like these because his purpose was known to him. The story of his temptation in the wilderness affirms who he was, whose he was, and why he lived among us.

After being blessed by God, Matthew said, "Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." The words in this Scripture affirm that it was God's plan for Jesus to be challenged -- not Satan's doing. Evil was willing to tempt Jesus, but it was the Spirit of God leading Jesus to that destiny, and Jesus' opportunity to be tested. The temptation of Christ was God's way to demonstrate the perfection of God's human and divine Son Jesus, and his power to resist sin and defeat the forces of evil in the universe.

I envision Jesus and Satan going back and forth in this cosmic battle and I've asked myself, 'for what purpose?' Most likely Jesus wanted humanity to know that we too would be tempted, and that we too would need to rely on the strength of our convictions and faith. It is in times of hardship and vulnerability, more than any other, that we must remember to rely on God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as our protector and mediator and to hold on to God's affirmation: "You are my daughter, you are my son, my Beloved, in you I am well pleased."

For humanity, it's not about winning or losing a human or a cosmic battle. It is about relying on the power of God to sustain us amid the challenges and to be reminded that in our struggles and temptations we are blessed and claimed as God's own. Jesus taught us to ask for God's help to steer us away from temptation in the Lord's prayer and to deliver us from evil; in other words, to depend on Him.

Our uncertainties are normal and the result of being God's human creation. I imagine that God expects our questions and our doubts just as God knows our suffering, and that his only Son would suffer and die for our salvation. Let's not forget that before humanity was formed, God consecrated us. The first chapter of Genesis describes that consecration of human creation in a dialogue between God and the Holy Spirit with these words, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...So God created humankind in the image of God; male and female he created them...and *God blessed them.*" Then, soon after God created and consecrated the first family, they did exactly what God asked them *not* to do! Adam and Eve were as human as we are!

We are also called to sojourn into our Christian mission with a consecration, Holy Baptism, and to acknowledge our belonging to God. Like Jesus, we too face temptations. Each temptation in the Gospel story has a symbolic meaning: we are tempted to survive apart from the food that comes from God (Deut. 8:2-3), but we are reminded that it is better to go hungry than to disobey or go against God's will. We are tempted to assume that God will miraculously protect us from anything and everything in life (Ps. 91:11,12), but we don't normally do something asinine just to test whether God will "show up", let us not forget that God gave us common sense and the spirit of discernment! We are also tempted, like Christ was, to worship the world instead of God not money, power, or material goods. In his last temptation, it seemed like Satan realized he was not winning, and so he pulled out all the stops and boldly asked Jesus to worship him. The evil one knew that Jesus would become a suffering servant and so why not just give Satan that moment of glory, and erase the suffering that would follow? No chance, Christ suffered to take on our suffering, and he died so that we would rise with him. Satan wanted that gift, that blessing too, but it would never be.

In the aftermath of the cosmic battle the evil one was defeated and the angels came to Jesus and served Him in ways that we cannot quite imagine. We have the company of angels surrounding us too and lifting us up as well. As I said in the children's story this morning, each one of us reaches out to someone, we are God's angels. There are angels/people out there who reach out to us too. We are part of the company of angels and at the same time we are given angels to guide us, raise us up, and direct us through the wilderness of our lives

I invite you in this holy Lent to explore your wilderness. Where are you most tempted? What tempts you? How do you endure your cosmic battle? Can you identify your angels? When in doubt, just remember whose you are!