

Lent I

This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!

On this First Sunday of Lent, and certainly the Sunday after Confirmation, we do well to consider the baptism of Jesus, and his subsequent temptation in the desert. When you take the prophetic testimony of the Old Testament, and then add to it the perfections of Jesus Christ in this world. When you take Jesus' full revelation seen in his miracles of Epiphany, his temptation in the desert for 40 days—even his weeping over Jerusalem. His denouncing of Rome, and his love of vagrants. When you then add to it his suffering, torture, and death—his glorious ascension and mighty resurrection. Bake on 350 for 3 years of ministry, then what do you get? You might get a weird religion. I was tempted as a child to think of each story in Holy Scripture as the rando story of the day club. Jesus was tempted in the desert, because, well, Jesus was tempted in the desert. I never occurred to me that 40-days hanging out with animals means that we have a new Noah on the scene, and this time we will get a Kingdom which shall never fail, unlike the end of the Noah story. Certainly we risk being a weird religion. But Paul seems rather clear on another point. You get the soul-penetrating, evil-destroying, death-defying, heaven-unveiling light of Jesus Christ that is far bigger you're your delusions or illness. Far bigger than your insecurities and soul-searching. Far brighter than your darkest secret, and something that makes the billions of lumens pouring out of our sun look like a shadow. Friends, we fight with light.

Baptism, referenced this morning as salvific, is the commissioning of the new ambassadors—the full licensing of the Holy Spirit. This is the death ceremony that commissions your life-long activity of pushing back darkness in this world. Political spectacle is not dramatic enough. It's weak in this respect, because we are not fighting mere partisan politics in this sacred vocation, though we should. We are fighting soul-paralysis—the slow death of accommodation with indifference, which is far more insidious. We are fighting hell here today. We are fighting the lie that our well-lived lives of belly-filling are somehow contending with evil. And it's not true. Lent says, "we are bound by nothing but Christ!" You are born in baptism, you are educated through the Word of God, you are fed through body and blood, and you are commissioned for Gospel ministry through the laying on of hands. Lent says, your neighbor is often your enemy, and you love him all the same. Lent says that your interlocutor is often your own flesh, and so you are patient with the rest of annoying humanity because your true enemy is much closer than 'that guy.' Or 'those people.' The enemy is your own heart of self-justification and petty annoyance. And therefore love wins the day. Love wins the day. Because we fight with light as 'the baptized.'

Let me remark on the significance of his temptation—of Lent—in another way. We just chanted the following:

By thy baptism, fasting, and temptation, good Lord deliver us.

Notice that his temptation delivers us. He did not go to the wilderness this morning to merely show you that he has psychological grit (though he does). He did not go to the wilderness this morning so that he could turn around and look you in the face and say, "buck up." He went into the wilderness to deliver you from sin and death. There is no salvation apart from HIS suffering in the wilderness. I would never be able to anoint a saint clinging to the last moments of his life in the name of someone who never suffered. I would never be able to anoint a saint clinging to the last moments of his life in the name of someone who refused to risk the last moment of his own life. We apply prayers in the name of Jesus to those who are suffering because Jesus suffered. And won. It would be impossible to identify with a 'slick' Savior. Jesus is not 'slick.' He was acquainted with sorrow and with grief and upon him was placed the chastisement of us all. Lent is a reminder to every exhausted mother, to every burned out employee, to every grieving widow and son that there was One who was acquainted with grief and with sorrow on behalf of his saints; acquainted with chastisement on behalf of his saints; so that his saints would be delivered from the final sting of pain, suffering, and death. The last laugh is on the world.

It is for this reason that I love the Bible and the Kingdom to which it points. I do not love the Bible because it helps me feel better about myself, though that may come. I do not love the Bible because it helps me make better financial decisions, though prudence may come. I do not love the Bible because it gives me a Christian political worldview, though justice may become more clear. I love the Bible because it arms the people of God with love and with light. This is the ministry of the Holy Spirit, both in our fasting and our feasting. There is nothing confusing or hocus pocus about the indwelling Holy Spirit, dear friends. The substance of his ministry is made so very clear in baptism AND confirmation—the substance of his ministry is to arm the people of God with light and with love to contend with sin and darkness and death at every level. May we be filled with the Holy Spirit at St. John's.

At this altar, an unimaginable, radioactive, potent gift of hell-destroying grace is given to the people of God. It's unmanageable, except for the Holy Spirit. Its power shrugs at the mere mention of raising the dead, so potent is its grace. Its power smirks at the very idea of remaking the entire world, because it's already happened. It's here that you receive God. God is not hiding. God is not hiding behind the next magical coincidence of your life. God is fully present. God is fully alive. God is fully available. It is here that you enter into the joy of your master. Dear friends, Jesus was tempted in the desert of suffering, so that he might be a means of grace in your temptation and suffering as well. And that means of grace is now available at this very altar. Worship Him.

In the name...

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Nathan Carr <ncarr@theacademyok.org>

Sat, Feb 17, 2024 at 10:52 AM

To: "Nathan D. Carr" <removeyoursandal@gmail.com>

“The Church is not a club for religious people. The Church is a way of living together before God, a new way of being human together. What Jesus and the apostles proclaimed was not a new ideology or a new religion, in our attenuated modern sense. What they proclaimed was salvation, and that meant a new human world, a new social and political reality. They proclaimed that God had established the eschatological order of human life in the midst of history, not perfectly, but truly. The Church anticipates the form of the human race as it will be when it comes to maturity; she is the ‘already’ of the new humanity that will be perfected in the ‘not yet’ of the last day. Conversion is the beginning of a ‘resocialization,’ induction into an alternative *paideia*, and ‘inculturation’ into the way of life practiced by the eschatological humanity... The gospel is the announcement of the Father’s formation, through His Son and the Spirit, of a new city—the city of God... God created a world of stories, symbols, rituals, and community rules. Into this world of stories, God introduced a rival story; into a world of books, God came with His own library; in a world of symbols and rituals and sacrificial meals, the Church was organized by a ritual bath and a feast of bread and wine; in the midst of cultures with their own ethos and moral atmosphere, God gathered a community to produce the aroma of Christ in their life together.” - *Against Christianity*, Peter Leithart, p. 17-18

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