

# First Sunday of Lent

The Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert,  
and he remained in the desert for forty days,  
tempted by Satan.

He was among wild beasts,  
and the angels ministered to him.

After John had been arrested,  
Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God:  
"This is the time of fulfillment.  
The kingdom of God is at hand.  
Repent, and believe in the gospel."

Mk 1:12-15

On the first Sunday of Lent, the whole Church is reading from the Gospel a story of Jesus going to the desert. Why would he go there? There are many reasons why people have been going to the desert since the earliest of times. They go because the desert is empty, because it's far away from others, because they want to think or to understand themselves.

When Jesus goes to the desert, he meets Satan. It's a shocking meeting, an enormous paradox. The Essence of Good, the Pure Love that became man, meets somebody who is so conflicted internally and so self-centered that he wants everything to perish with him. This is who Satan is. He is the highest form of narcissism combined with absolute despair.

Jesus is God, so he knows exactly who Satan is. He is also man, so he is like every man confronted with a temptation of evil; temptation of self-centeredness, temptation of rejection of God.

Satan doesn't know Jesus. He thinks he's dealing with another man, perhaps more important than others. He probably perceives the power of holiness behind him, but he's probably very, very confused. So they are talking.

The story of Mark doesn't tell us exactly what the conversation was about, but we have other Gospels that precisely present the content to us. Satan is tempting Jesus. Why would he do that? There is a certain fundamental weakness in evil. That weakness is that Satan cannot force anybody to evil. Evil that is committed without freedom is really not evil; it is just slavery, deprivation of dignity. The true evil – evil that gives Satan victory – is something that is done with full understanding, with full freedom. That's why he has to tempt Jesus, so that Jesus acts of his own will against himself.

Why would God allow Satan to even come to him? He does it for us. He wants us to see it, he wants us to see the weaponry of Satan, the fact that Satan manipulates you and me for his own goals. He wants to use us by confusing us, by misdirecting our longings. He wants to present evil as good so that we freely embrace it and in doing so hurt ourselves, put ourselves into internal slavery or eternal blindness.

Jesus wants us to witness His temptation so that we will not be afraid to look our enemy in the eyes. Why? Because that very freedom that is so dangerous to us is the greatest weakness of evil. Jesus wants to see that the highest form of freedom is faithfulness to the Father.

Doesn't it sound like a paradox that surrendering oneself into the Father's hands could be the highest form of freedom? It is not a paradox because to choose the Father is to choose Love. The Father is Love and, in His almighty freedom, he makes space for our freedom; because without freedom, there is no love. This is the logic that Satan cannot fathom. This is the logic that is the beginning of my salvation.

In the depth of the deepest despair and temptation, I can always choose Him. That's the amazing power of God. He gives us freedom to choose love. This is the real meaning of the meeting in the desert. You and I have power over evil because, at every moment, we can choose God and we can choose love. When we do that, everything comes back to the right proportions, and even if it's difficult and painful, even if the whole world seems to be against us, we don't have to be afraid anymore.