

Grace and Peace be to you from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.

Having witnessed the glory of Christ on the mountaintop, we now descend with Him into the depths of the valley. Though it is hidden beneath the dust and dirt of Adam, the seed that is sown by the preaching of Christ during Epiphany germinates and begins to emerge, seeking the waters of Holy Baptism and the sunlight of the Gospel, even now anticipating the good fruits that are born by the life-giving tree of the cross. And so, during Lent, we intensify our daily drowning in the waters of Baptism through contrition and repentance. Lent emphasizes the discipline of the Christian faith and life, the ongoing challenge of spiritual warfare with the old evil foe, and the necessary works of love and mercy that characterize the life that Christ now lives in us.

Yet as we focus on repentance, one of the most common yet deadly mistakes is for Christians to treat Scripture as a guide or manual. The strong temptation is to open the pages of Scripture and immediately find ourselves within the story. *We are Abraham. We are David. We are Ester. We are Daniel. We are Peter. We are Paul.* And even, at times, *we are Jesus.* As we witness the events unfolding in our Gospel today, the temptation is to put ourselves in the driver's seat. Jesus is showing us, like any good teacher, how to go head-to-head with the devil and temptation. But such a reading would be a lethal misstep. Indeed, there is something to be learned from Jesus. However, if our primary approach is to play with fire, we are going to get burned.

Instead, we must approach Scripture for what it is. Jesus told the Jews that they studied the Scriptures because they believed that in them, they had life. In truth, the Scriptures are a testimony of Jesus. They bear witness to Him that we may have life in Him. So to grasp the significance of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, we must ask, out there in the wilderness, who is Jesus?

Matthew gives us the sense that, having heard the proclamation of the Father, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," and still dripping from His baptism, the Spirit propels Jesus into this direct conflict with Satan out in the wilderness. For Matthew, the Baptism and Temptation of Jesus are inseparably linked. So for the question, "Who is Jesus out in the wilderness," the answer is rooted in the Father's proclamation that Jesus is His beloved Son. And what was Jesus doing that pleased His Father? He was humbling Himself to be in the place of sinners. He was being baptized on behalf of the people. In His Baptism, Jesus was anointed by the Spirit to be the champion of the people. And out there in the wilderness, that is just who Jesus is. He is the nation of Israel reduced to one.

Long ago, through the prophet Moses, God said to Pharaoh, "Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, let my son go that he may serve me." And long ago, God said through the prophet Hosea, "Out of Egypt I called my son." Matthew takes notice of how in many and various ways, Jesus fulfills the prophetic words concerning the Son. As God's son, Israel was brought out of Egypt and baptized in the Red Sea. Following that was a time of testing and temptation in the wilderness where they would prove what kind of son they would be. So, too, Matthew offers us a profound understanding of Jesus as the One who stands for the many. He was called out of Egypt as a child, baptized in the Jordan, and now finds Himself in the wilderness for a time of testing and temptation. Jesus is the sum and pinnacle of the Old Testament people of God. He is Israel. He is the son of God.

But why is Jesus, as the Son of God, as Israel, out in the wilderness? Well, as their time of testing and temptation proved, the nation of Israel was a rebellious and wayward child. They grumbled against God. They refused to trust His goodness and mercy. And so Jesus is out there to take their place. Israel needed someone to represent them. Jesus is out there because Israel failed miserably. They made a mess of things. Israel did not live on every word that came from God's mouth. They were happy to test Him. And, at times, it seemed all too convenient for them to worship and serve some other god. Israel didn't need an example. They needed a Savior. They needed a champion to come and deliver them out of their hopeless desperation. You see, Jesus is not out there in the wilderness as an example. He is out there playing cleanup.

Jesus wasn't an example for Israel, nor is He an example for you. Now, don't get me wrong, we do *learn* from Jesus what a faithful and obedient child of God looks like, and we *should* aspire to be like Him. This desire is the work of the Spirit within us. However, looking to Jesus primarily as an example is no better than searching the Scriptures because you think that in them you have life. We are no better than Israel. We face our testing and temptation, and what kind of child do you prove to be? When we look at Jesus as our example, the faithful and obedient child of God, we quickly learn that we aren't.

Do you use your power, vocation, and identity as a child of God to make life easier? Do you choose the bread that perishes? We know what we've chosen far too often, just as Israel did long ago. But Jesus never demands to be served. He never chooses the path of least resistance. Not once. He feeds on every word that comes from Father's mouth. Do you ever question if God's ways are right? Ever ask yourself if God can be trusted? Do you put Him to the test? That's a battle we continually lose. But Jesus never doubts. Not even in the garden. He may not desire the cup, but Jesus never doubts the Father's will. Not once. Do you ever deny God through your words or actions? Do you serve anything or anyone other than God? Do you join yourself to those God would have you avoid? We are here today. We're baptized. We confess Jesus is Lord, and so yes, we worship the true God. But how often have we taken that first step, or maybe the second or third, toward denying and rejecting the God to whom we belong? Jesus never does, says, or even thinks anything apart from the Lord His God.

The battle against temptation is a battle we cannot fight. Sin, Satan, and death easily overpower us. It is not a battle we can win, even with Jesus as our example. You all confessed this just moments ago. You sang, "The old satanic foe has sworn to work us woe. With craft and dreadful might he arms himself to fight. On earth he has no equal. No strength of ours can match His might. We would be lost, rejected. But now a champion comes to fight, whom God Himself elected. You ask who this may be? The Lord of hosts is He, Christ Jesus, mighty Lord, God's only Son adored. He holds the field victorious."

Jesus isn't our example. He's our Savior. He's our champion. There, in the wilderness, Jesus takes up our cause and joins the battle against sin, Satan, and death. And He wins. He wins! He turns the dry place of our failure into an oasis of His faithfulness. And that is why we are here, watching the battle that's not for you or me to fight. It's for Jesus. Only He can win. He has won. There in the desert, later in the garden, all the way to the glorious battle on the tree, and then bursting forth from the empty tomb in victory, for me, for you. We're watching, all right, but it's not so we can study His moves to become like Jesus. It's so we can belong to Him. It's so that we can be with Him to this very day. As the baptized, we say, "I'm with Him."

That's what the season of Lent is all about. It is undertaken in view of the great exodus of Christ that He accomplishes in Jerusalem. We share that exodus from death to life with Him through Holy Baptism. Lent thus exemplifies the pilgrimage of life, our ongoing journey through the wilderness on our way to the promised land. This journey can only be accomplished in Jesus. To that end, it fixes our eyes on Christ Jesus, "the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." He is Himself our great champion against Satan, our great Redeemer from sin, death, and hell, "who overcame the assaults of the devil and gave His life as a ransom for many that with cleansed hearts we might be prepared joyfully to celebrate the paschal feast in sincerity and truth."

So is there nothing here for us? Because we do face battles every day. Is there nothing for our struggle? I think there is, and it may work like this...when the temptation comes for you to stop caring, pull back, and play it safe, here's what you do: you say to that temptation, "No thanks. I'm with Jesus." When the temptation comes for you to run after some thing, some one, some feeling, some whatever that you shouldn't...you face that temptation and say, "No thanks. I'm with Jesus." And when the temptation comes to discouragement, to wondering whether it's worth it after all, remember the faithfulness Jesus for you, and say, "Yes, it is worth it, because we are with the faithful One. We are with Jesus. Amen."