

LENT1.A

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

February 10, 2008

Genesis 2:15-17;3:1-7

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

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¹Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." ⁴But he answered, "It is written,

'One does not live by bread alone,

but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you,'

and 'On their hands they will bear you up,

so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

⁷Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

¹⁰Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

'Worship the Lord your God,

and serve only him.'"

¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

After his baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness for a forty day fast. That time spent in the wilderness was a preparation for his ministry. This lesson from the Gospel is appropriate for the first Sunday in Lent, because we are in our forty days of preparation, and reflection, and meditation - just as Jesus was. The time of Lent is to remind us of our need for a new relationship with God. We need this for a new relationship in the freedom God offers us.

That is the real message in this story about Jesus and his temptation. It is a message of freedom.

Jesus is having a head to head confrontation with Satan, and what is Satan using as his weapon? Security. He is saying, "Jesus, take the security of having enough to eat."

"Jump off the temple and claim the security of physical safety as God saves you." "Take the security of power."

And in every case Jesus rejects security. Every time Jesus says, "I would rather have freedom." Freedom is more than enough to eat, or physical health, or power. Freedom is the way God created us to live.

Security versus freedom – it's an old conflict.

In the thirteenth century, the church had one of its darker periods. It was called the Spanish Inquisition. The church felt that it should decide what was right and wrong for everybody and enforce its decisions with a strong arm. (If that sounds familiar in the world of today then perhaps we would do well to be frightened by that familiarity.) Members of the church involved in this enterprise of the Inquisition carried out the task zealously. Sometimes they used torture. If a person was found to have the wrong faith, that person was often executed. They found some security in that sort of thing.

Remember the message of the Gospel is freedom.

Dostoyevsky wrote about the time of the Inquisition. It is not a factual story, but it tells us something about ourselves, and about our temptation from Satan. It is still the same temptation. When we try to live as God created us to live, Satan comes at us with his number one weapon, security.

In Dostoyevsky's story, Jesus makes an appearance in Seville, Spain during the Inquisition. Jesus is looking around and the Inquisitor, a high-ranking church official, the man in charge of the Inquisition, sees him. Immediately, he has Jesus thrown into a cell. "Get him out of sight." You are probably thinking the Inquisitor has had a mix up; he doesn't know who Jesus really is.

He knows.

That night, when no one can see, the Inquisitor comes to Jesus' prison cell. The Inquisitor is an old man. He's ninety years old and he's seen a lot. He is an expert on human nature. He is furious at Jesus. The Inquisitor says, "You will be executed tomorrow. I will do away with you as soon as possible. Of all the heretics that have ever been, you Jesus, are

the worst. You have caused more problems than anyone. ... You did a terrible thing to humanity. ... You gave it freedom. You gave us freedom and we have been living in dread ever since."

The old man knew a lot about human nature. He knew what he was talking about. Of all the things that cause us anxiety, freedom is probably the worst. Freedom calls for us to act. Freedom leaves us without any excuses. Freedom gives us responsibility. It's terrifying - and the Inquisitor was not going to let Jesus get away with it.

The Inquisitor told Jesus, "You know where this all started - You were there in the wilderness. You had the opportunity to do what was right. The devil came to you with a perfectly reasonable suggestion. 'Turn these stones into bread.' The devil was right.

"You can't go into the world; you can't begin your ministry, with your hands empty. You have nothing but freedom? People don't know what to do with freedom. Freedom terrifies people. They dread it.

"Now, see these stones? Turn these stones into bread. That's what people want. Give them something. Give the people something they can feel and touch. Mostly give them something to eat. Jesus, if you will go among the people carrying bread, the people will follow you like a flock of sheep. They will be grateful; they will be obedient. "

The Inquisitor was old; he had seen much. He had seen people suffering through making decisions, because of their freedom. He had seen people arguing about how to be faithful when the world changes so much. The Inquisitor had no use for Jesus who could have avoided so much confusion and hardship. He looked at Jesus and said, "You could have bought all that obedience with just a little bread."

"Jesus, you said, 'Man does not live by bread alone', but man could have lived by bread alone - and been more content. ... Instead, you gave him freedom.

"Jesus, you heretic, you trouble maker, look what you've done. Don't you know men prefer peace to freedom. Men prefer even death, more than the freedom to choose between good and evil."

And so, the Inquisitor condemned Jesus as the worst of all heretics. Jesus had burdened humanity with the awful curse of freedom.

If you were on the jury, how would you vote?

Nothing has given us more pain, anxiety, and frustration than freedom. We want things to be certain, and clear. It would be much simpler. Jesus would be easy to obey and follow.

Religions and religious leaders spring up regularly who promise security and their success is phenomenal. Throughout history, anyone who has offered security can count on obedience. Make up a religion of security. Confidently give answers to all questions. Never allow doubt. Promise good health. Promise bread. Promise economic riches. Promise people they will get what they pray for. And a lot of people will give obedience with no thought. But when you hear those promises, remember the Gospel lesson of this morning. The promises of food, health, and power...the traditional weapons of Satan.

Satan used those promises on Jesus in the wilderness. But Jesus would not turn the stones into bread. He said we would live by more than bread. Jesus gave us freedom. We must choose good or evil. We must live our faith. It's not simple. It's not secure.

Jesus will not buy our obedience with bread. Jesus will come into this world offering, not riches, nor success, nor health, but offering freedom; offering a relationship with him. He takes our guilt and leaves us free.

Christ leads us, but he leads us to a relationship with him. We are left with the freedom to act and behave, however that relationship with Christ tells us to act and behave. We are free and it can be frightening.

The Arch-heretic, Jesus Christ, has caused all of this confusion; he is the cause of all this questioning. We have to decide every day what we will do in every situation. We have to think. We have to use our minds. We have to pray for guidance. We have to struggle constantly.

He could have given us something useful, like bread. The security would be nice. But he gave us freedom. It's ours. We can't give our freedom back.

It would be nice to have someone else make our decisions for us. Somebody to tell us how to think would be secure. If we had the safety of pat answers, someone to tell us who to trust and who to dislike. And if that's what we are looking for, Satan is still there. He is still willing to give us the security of promises for enough to eat, health, power. All the promises of security - if you will only give up the freedom you have in the love of God.

Of course, Satan's promises are not true. Jesus tells us what is true. "You are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (John 8:31)

We are free. We have the truth. God loves us. God made us too important to let others think for us. God loving us has given us life. We live in the freedom that calls us to choose to love God. It cannot be forced. It must be our choice. It is the freedom brought to us by Jesus Christ. He carried it with him out of the wilderness instead of loaves of bread.

Even though our sinful world branded him an arch-heretic, Jesus Christ, is still with us. He has not abandoned us. He has not abandoned us to our sins, or to our ill-health, or our despair, or our failures. He has not even abandoned us in the face of possibly our most terrible trial of all...our freedom. He is still with us. Not only to give us freedom, but to be with us and lead us throughout this wilderness of a life.

We do not live by Satan's security. We live by Jesus' freedom.