

1st Sunday Lent Year "C"
March 5-6, 2022

The angel on my right shoulder

Readings: Deuteronomy 26: 4-10; Romans 10: 8-13; Luke 4:1-13

In all three of the cycles (Matthew, Mark, and this year, Luke) the Gospel for the first Sunday of Lent focuses on the account of Jesus' temptation by the devil. It is the classic biblical scene of Good vs. Evil outside of the Garden of Eden. It contains several facets of the nature of temptation, any of which may align with our own experience. It is not too much of a stretch for us to see in these temptations a mirror of our own lives.

Jesus is tempted:

- Physically- to satisfy his hunger amid his fast.
- Emotionally- to satiate the human appetite for power and glory.
- Spiritually- to demonstrate the depth of his relationship w/the Father.

In all the essential ways in which we are tempted, Jesus was, though with one major difference. Rather than succumb to temptation, each time he drew upon his own relationship with the Father, so as to re-commit himself to his mission. We do a disservice to the human nature of Jesus if we see these temptations as merely play acting—as if Jesus knew all along that the devil had no power and was not in the least afraid of him.

In the 2004 film "The Passion of the Christ," an under-appreciated scene in the film centers on the masterful way in which the director weaves in the presence of evil through the person of the devil. I have never seen evil depicted in such a manner. The androgynous figure, devoid both of hair and eyebrows and covered with a hood, lingers around in the background from time to time, beginning in the Garden of Gethsemane scene.

At times, the figure literally walks in a different direction from the crowd, moving ever so smoothly, gracefully with eyes that literally stare you down. It gave me a new appreciation for the mysterious way evil enters the world and in our hearts. It is a portrait of evil that sews seeds of doubt in one's mind, and then quietly lurks in the background. What will happen next?

This is how most of us experience temptation towards evil in our lives: enticing, inviting, second-guessing, torn between choices of the head and heart. This point was impressed upon me as a child while watching Saturday morning cartoons– the Flintstones! In an episode dealing with a sweepstakes ticket, poor Fred is barraged by the two conflicting voices: an angel over his right shoulder encouraging him to make the right choice, the devil over his left shoulder leading him astray. After all, the word *sinister* derives from the Latin word for left the hand.

This is precisely why Jesus’ response is so instructive for us. In an early 3rd century homily, the theologian Origen preached about good and bad angels. To his skeptical Catechumens, he bolstered his case by appealing to a 2nd century work, noting that there the reader “will find that two angels are present to every man: a wicked angel, who exhorts him to wrongdoing; and a good angel, who urges him to do everything good.”¹

He went to say that “if good thoughts are present in our hearts and justice springs up in our souls,”² then we may be assured it is the “angel of the Lord” speaking to us. This worldview is clearly not shared by many today, appearing overly simplistic– you might say “cartoonish” to them.

But Origen was brilliant, no fool. Here, he was spot on. He intuited from Scripture the tug we feel due to original sin. His was a prayerful reading of the text, an early for of *lectio divina*. He cites a verse from St. Matthew’s Gospel in which Jesus, in speaking of the little children says, “Their angels always see the face of my Father, who is in heaven,” Origen ends with an exhortation: “If I am in the Church, no matter how very little I am, my angel enjoys the liberty and the trust always to see ‘the face of the Father, who is in heaven.’”³ Listen to the voice of God– all will be well.

¹ cf. Origen, *Hom 35:3 on Luke 12:57-59*, referencing *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 36:2-10. Thirty-nine of Origen’s homilies on the Gospel of Luke survive in Jerome’s Latin translation. Origen preached them in Caesarea, perhaps around 234 or 240, to a congregation of catechumens and faithful.

² Origen Homily 12 on Luke ((luke 2:8-11).

³ *Ibid.*, cf. Matthew 18:10

In the first temptation, Jesus responds to the invitation challenging his miraculous powers by quoting Scripture right back to the devil. It says, “Jesus answered him, ‘It is written...’” Two can play that game!

In the second instance, Jesus is brought to a high point, viewing of all the kingdoms that could be his. It was a worldly temptation, by showing him something good that could all be his. Jesus said to him in reply, “You shall worship the Lord your God; him alone shall you serve.”

In the third and final instance, the devil quotes Scripture again, evidently not having learned his lesson. Obedience to the Father is a characteristic of true sonship, and Jesus is tempted by the devil to rebel against God, overtly in the third case, more subtly in the first two. To the challenge, “If you are the Son of God,” Jesus cites Deuteronomy, “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.” The implication is clear. Jesus is telling the devil: “I know who I am, do you?”

The most troubling part of the encounter is left for the final line. The good ending is tempered by simply recounting, “when the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him **for a time.**” It isn’t over, it will happen again. We’ve been given fair warning. We’ll be dealing with temptation of one sort or another for years to come. It varies in each chapter of our lives, a teenager’s temptations differ wildly from the senior citizen, whom the evil one desires to have doubts of faith. This is why the words of the *Hail Mary* are so valuable, “now and at the hour of our death, amen.”

We must remember that we are neither slaves to evil, nor are we powerless against it. The blood of the Cross has washed us clean and gives us the strength to carry on. As we begin this year’s Lenten journey through the desert of our own weaknesses, if we but follow the path to the glory of the Cross, therein we will find the grace necessary to refresh and renew our thirst. Let us support one another in this journey, together, following the path set out for us by our Lord, leading us to our true and eternal home.