

THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT (INVOCAVIT)

Matthew 4:1-11

“No, You Are!”

Jesus' temptation happened *“immediately”* after His Baptism. His ministry to sinners, begun with a Baptism instituted for sinners, continues with temptations to sin, as He, for us, submits to experience as man what He could never experience as God alone. For forty intense days, the length of our Lenten season, in the most desolate circumstances, riddled with hunger and thirst, without human contact, He was at war with Satan, who, as he is wont to do, promised much in return for what seemed like little. But Jesus saw through the shiny skin to the rotten seeds of his opponent's ruse, and, as the Word Himself, wielded the Word as both shield and sword.

Like a sawed-off-shotgun, the devil shapes Scripture for his nefarious purposes. Yet, as he would kill with the Word, we must live by it, not as we shape it, but as a whole. The Bible is not a stone pile where we dig for rocks to throw. No one has ever won a war throwing stones. Wars are won by destroying the enemy's will to fight, and only God's love, manifest in Christ and packed into the whole of Holy Writ like gunpowder, can crush the Serpent's will to fight.

While temptation comes from the devil and our sinful flesh, God uses it for our benefit. Temptation, like Lent, is the school of the Savior's Passion. As a heart attack pushes us into the gym, temptation pushes us deeper into the Scriptures, makes us more fervent in prayer, makes us better soldiers of the cross. Each round with our Old Adam trains us in the ring into which Baptism has placed us, as we strap on the gloves of the gospel and swing back at the lies of the devil with the cross of Christ, which we carry as His disciples and with His help.

But we dare not think temptation fights fair. No, temptation gouges the eyes and hits below the belt. Temptation scratches and bites—whatever it takes to win. If temptation were a Piston, it would be Bill Laimbeer, great when he's on your team, but unbearable when he's against you. Temptation knows what riles us and picks away patiently, trusting that eventually we'll snap, we'll sink to its level, we'll have had enough. And the worst part is that temptation doesn't merely appeal to what it hopes to make us, but to who we already are according to our fallen nature, for much of what temptation suggests is precisely what we already want, and that is what makes it so dangerous. Temptation polishes what our sinful eyes are already drawn to, spices up what our sinful bellies already crave, pushes closer what our sinful hands already reach for, and opens the door to where our sinful feet already yearn to go. The devil wields temptation so well precisely because he's given way to it himself, precisely because he knows that the greatest evil is the abuse of something good. He need not create to tempt. He need merely corrupt what has already been created, turning some of God's greatest blessings into a horrible curse, so that food and drink are lost in gluttony, property in greed, sex in lust, and reason in idolatry.

And so it is proper that St. John Chrysostom compares Jesus today to a wrestling coach:

When He had therefore fasted for forty days and for forty nights, and afterwards was hungry, He gave an opportunity to the devil to draw near, so that He might teach us through this encounter how we are to overcome and defeat him. This a wrestler also does. For in order to teach his pupils how to win he himself engages in contests with others, demonstrating on the actual bodies of others that they may learn how to gain the mastery. This is what took place here. For, desiring to draw the devil into contest, He made His hunger known to him. He met him as he approached, and meeting him, with the skill which He alone possessed, He once, twice, and a third time, threw His enemy to the ground. (Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers, Vol. 2, p. 17.)

As a side note, you need not search out opponents to wrestle. They'll step into the ring on their own. Welcoming temptation, unlike resisting temptation, doesn't make one stronger. It makes one dumb (d-u-m). Pushing the envelope only leads to paper cuts. The ER is full of people who wanted to see "if they could do" something or another. God will let you know what temptations He would have you resist as He allows them to reach you. There is no need to go courting them. Always remember, there is nothing more pathetic than a "What harm can it do?" followed by a "How could this have happened to me?"

Luther once observed, "*The best way to drive out the devil, if he will not yield to texts of scripture, is to jeer and flout him, for he cannot bear scorn.*" And in Lent we do just that, because, even as we weep over sin, we rightly laugh at the devil and the folly of his labor, not in a foolhardy or cocksure fashion, but because we know our Lord has already won the fight we couldn't help but lose. Christ is the Victor, in the wilderness, in the garden, on the cross, and, through faith, in our hearts. So when the devil speaks to your belly, speak back of the Bread of Life. When the devil speaks to your pride, boast in the cross of Christ. When the devil speaks to your fleshly fear, inoculate yourself with the medicine of the manger, of God made flesh to walk with you through Calvary and the grave. When the devil speaks to your heart, remind Him that there is home there for but one Master. And, while you are at it, point Him to the bruised heel of your Savior. He'll know what you mean, because his trampled melon is forever tattooed on it.

Steal a trick from the pastor's son, who, whenever called or told something he doesn't like, points back at his accuser and shouts, "No, you are." When the devil accuses you with breath that matches his message, when your old Adam points his soggy, wrinkled and indicting finger in your direction between dunkings in the waters of your Baptism, fire back, "No, you are." "No, you are condemned. No, you are lost. No, you are beyond redemption. No, you are a sack of rotting reprobation good only for the fires of hell. I am acquitted. I am redeemed. I am elected, not for hell, but for one of the many rooms in my Father's house. Your back is on the mat, and pathetic as I may seem and feel at times, I stand victorious with my Victor. And, if you need proof, I'll let my scrawny leg give you proof right in the gut. You who would have my Jesus jump off the pinnacle the temple, why don't you go and do the same? The battle is won. The deed is done. My Jesus has already felled you, not once, not twice, but three times." Amen.