

“Sin, Death, and Repentance. It’s Lent, Right?”¹

I

Now I know this is Valentines and all, but I’m not going to talk about romantic love and all that. No, instead... let’s talk about sin and death and repentance. Seems fair – Don’t you think? I mean, being Lent and all. So let’s do that for a while, circling around today’s Gospel scene – this wilderness story – in the process.

But now let’s ease into it by way of another little story.

A few years back, there was a novel out titled Point of No Return. And in it, Charlie Gray – after years of apple-polishing and bucking for promotion and dedicating all his energies to a single goal, Charlie finally gets to be vice-president of the fancy little New York bank where he works. And his promotion assures him and his family all the security and standing that he’s always hungered for.

And then that terrible moment of truth comes when he looks around and he realizes that it’s really not what he wanted after all ... when that prize he’s spent his entire life trying to win, suddenly turns to ashes in his hands.

So Charlie learns that “one does not live by bread alone.” And I believe this just happens to be ... among other things ... true. And it happens to be very close to that truth that Charlie Gray comes to realize ... unfortunately too late ... that he’s not made to live on status and salary alone.

No, there’s something terribly important missing from his life even though he’s not sure what it is. But the hunger for some meaning ... for some purpose ... eats at him ... gnaws him at this core.

And somehow ... I do think this story of Charlie’s life has something to do with the Gospel scene this morning ... Where Jesus has just been baptized by John, is then driven into the wilderness by the Spirit, and is tested by the devil – to see just what He’s made of – what it really means to be the Beloved of God.

‘Cause Jesus not only confronts the devil out there in this story, but I think Jesus also confronts his own very real temptations, confronts his own very real vulnerable

points, confronts His own spiritual demons, demons cloaked in that guise that's maybe most appealing to Jesus ... maybe appealing to His weakest points at that moment.

See, I think even Jesus doesn't avoid this inner devil calling out to him ... doesn't dismiss ... doesn't underrate him. No, He fights with him, wrestles with him in an agony of spiritual sweat. Or else there wouldn't have been any temptation for Him to begin with.

And see for you and me, I strongly suspect this struggle with our demons will not stop this side of the grave. 'Cause Luke ends his scene with the words, "when the devil had finished every test, he departed from Jesus ... 'til an opportune time." So the devil bides his time ... until a more opportune time. And so he does. And so ... he does. In Charlie Gray's life ... in your life and in mine.

James Martin, a Jesuit author, has written a large book titled *Jesus: A Pilgrimage*. I read it. And I was struck by Martin's discussion of this very passage. He points out that actually what the devil dangled in front of Jesus' eyes were not bad things in themselves – bread to feed himself, a test of God's love and protection of Him, power and wealth. Not bad in themselves. In fact, you could argue that each temptation could be seen as good in some sense.

And interestingly, Martin says that it's actually easier to withstand pure, obvious evil. I mean, easy to spot theft, murder, betrayal ... easy in a way to say "No." Martin says actually the true temptation is the seemingly good one. That is, most of us act out of mixed motives ... and it's so easy to fall prey to sin when it's embedded in a good purpose.

See, temptation is not only real, but it's deceptive. And at the heart of deception are offers not to fall ... but to rise. "If you're really the Son of God ..." says the voice in Jesus' mind. See, there's nothing here of evil. I mean, think about it. No self-respecting devil would approach a person with offers of personal ruin, of social ruin, of professional ruin. No. That's in the small print at the bottom of the page.

Well, what's my point. My point is that sin is ubiquitous. C. S. Lewis once wrote that no one "knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good." No one knows

how bad she is, til she's tried very hard ... to be good. 'Cause only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is.

See, I think if you give in to temptation immediately – or after five minutes, you simply don't know what it would have been like an hour later ... a day later ... a week later ... after maybe you struggled a bit with your conscience. That's why bad folks, in one sense, know very little about badness. 'Cause they've lived a kind-of sheltered life by always immediately giving in to evil impulse.

No, you never find out the strength of the evil impulse inside yourself until you try to fight it. And Jesus, because He was the only one who never yielded to temptation, is also the only one who knows to the full what temptation means – so you could say He was the only complete realist.

But what about us? See, maybe the real work of hell is accomplished in the little things, in the mundane, day to day, small decisions that change minds and attitudes and afflict the human heart. Maybe the real work of the devil is accomplished not only in pursuing a good purpose with mixed motives, but also in the small resentments you hang onto. In that little grudge you just don't want to give up. Maybe the devil's work's accomplished in the raised eyebrow, in the snort of contempt. Maybe it's in refusing to forgive that family member, maybe in the self-righteous tone that you inflict on those who dare to differ from you. Maybe it's in your blindness to human need and suffering.

See I think maybe that's where most of the real devil's work is done, in the common activities of your daily life and mine, each unsuspecting day, one day at a time.

II

Well, enough of that. It is Lent. And I promised you that we would need to talk about temptation and sin this morning. So we've done that. We've done that. But I think there's something else deep down here if we dig a bit. And that's the topic of our mortality. "Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return." "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

Some of you were here on Ash Wednesday and you had ashes "imposed" on your forehead. That's how the Prayer Book puts it – imposition of ashes. And of course an imposition is something you don't want ... like "he really imposed on me and I didn't

like it one bit.” It’s nothing I desired, nothing I needed, nothing I wanted ... his imposing on me like that.

So the imposition of ashes may be something we don’t really want – honesty about our sin, honesty about our mortality, honesty about our finitude, about our moral frailty. ... In fact, it’s an awareness that I think you and I do almost anything to avoid. So we work out, get a personal trainer, eat yogurt ... anything to avoid the ultimate imposition, which is death.

But Lent reminds us, imposes upon us, that unpleasant fact that we expend a great deal of time, money, and effort doing anything we can to avoid the fact that we are dust. We are fallen, and we can’t get up on our own. There’s no way that we can save ourselves, by ourselves, and make ourselves permanent. ‘Cause even if you live to be eighty or ninety, your life is such a brief thing from birth to death.

So here’s my basic question. What are you going to do with it – this life of yours? What am I going to do with the rest of my life ... before we end up like Charlie Gray and the moment of truth comes too late? That, my friends, is the Lenten task before us, is it not? And I think there is a way to begin. And that is by way of the “little death” of repentance.

Now I know. I know you’ve heard that word a thousand times. But let’s take another look and see what’s possible right now for you and for me ... ‘cause – believe it or not ... that is the good news I have for you this morning!

III

See, to repent is to admit, “I am nothing but dust and ashes, raining down on my head.” And so we think about these failings of ours, and maybe regret the wrongs we’ve done, even in the name of good. But you know, as I’ve said before from this pulpit, anyone can regret. We all regret!! It’s cheap, really ...

But I think repentance is something different than regret. ‘Cause repentance means turning away from yourself – including all your regrets – turning toward Someone who has the authority to give the final answer to your entire life.

See, with regret, you’re beating up only yourself and ... maybe actually loving it in a way. I mean, see how sorry I am? But on the other hand, repentance recognizes the

possibility of an answer that can make things right. Repentance carries you toward reconciliation ... which goes both ways if you think about it.

‘Cause a heart turned toward God is also ready to turn toward others. Then I believe it’s possible to forgive another human being – someone who’s failed you, who’s hated you, who’s betrayed you. It’s possible, at least, to make something “right” with them. Oh, you may not continue as close friends or lovers, but something has been made right.

But as I said, repentance and making things right go both ways. And maybe the hardest thing here ... the hardest thing to make right is an act of lovelessness on your part – maybe betrayal ... that act whose consequences cannot be undone, for which there is no remedy. It is over. Over. ‘Cause there’s no one there to reconcile with. They’re just gone. Your arms are open, but no one’s arms are open to you.

You may repent, you may want forgiveness, but because of death – I mean, they’ve died – or because of distance, or because of circumstance, there’s no one to forgive you back. So maybe still guilt-ridden, you’ve fallen short of making something right.

But just then, Jesus stands in for the missing one. And Jesus says, “You can’t reconcile with that person, you can’t reconcile with that community ... because they are dead to you. But I am alive. I stand in for them. Reconcile with me. Reconcile with me. And make things ... right.”

Lent. See, we get these forty days of Lent – a lot of days – to prepare our hearts and minds for the work of Holy Week and Easter. So you and I have forty days to face the ways we respond to temptation. You have forty days to confront the wild demons in your own life. And it’s hard work to confront yourself. It’s not fun. It’s not easy.

But why not try it? ‘Cause Lent is for listening. And you will live each day “by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” Not at all ... a bad way to spend Lent. So listen ... as if your life depends on it. Because ... in fact ... it does.

Amen.

¹ Resources used: Synthesis for Lent I; Pulpit Resource Classic for Year C, February 14; Fred Craddock’s *Luke* (Interpretation series).