

A Sermon by Fr. Davenport  
10 February 2008

## **Lent I, Year A**

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

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

For me, one of the many blessings of our recent mission in Nicaragua was growing in admiration and affection for those who went on the trip. When you spend sixteen, even eighteen hours a day together - praying, working, talking, reflecting, you get to know one another. That's not to say we were without our absurdities. One of the first that struck me occurred shortly after we landed in Managua. At the airport before we climbed aboard a slightly seedy, but well air-conditioned tour bus, we had to load our luggage into a pickup truck. The thirteen of us barely managed to fit our mountain of luggage into the pickup.

Here we were beginning our Christian mission in a country where a concrete floor is a luxury, where more than a few changes of clothing is a luxury, and we were lugging along a heap of possessions to protect us as best we could from the many discomforts. I'm sure that I was the most insane and anxious of all, stuffing as many crutches into my suitcase as I could fit. Mine was the only one that was overweight.

Besides the multiple containers of insect repellent and sun screen, which I may have used once, besides the flashlights which I never used, I'd even packed several thick, hard-backed books. I didn't want to miss the opportunity to read if I had a spare moment. I had also packed up and brought along my sense of efficiency - wanting to use every moment productively. By the end of the week, I was getting over myself, even shedding a bit of my tightly wound sense of time.

We're going to give a presentation at coffee hour a few weeks from now about our experience so I am only going to mention one other aspect of our time together, one of my biggest surprises. I hadn't really anticipated worshiping with the people of San Juan de Oriente except on Sunday. We were there to do some teaching, to serve some food, to restore a building, but I'd not thought there would be daily worship with the community. It was one of the most important, and gratifying, parts.

When our tour bus arrived San Juan, it dropped us at the church where a lot of people were waiting for us. They gave us one of the warmest, most hospitable greetings you could have. We walked into the church, and their worship band started playing for us. They'd put together a welcome service for us, and I stood up by their altar with Padre Rodriguez, their parish priest, while they sang a bunch of

up-tempo worship songs accompanied by drums, guitars, tambourines, and an electronic keyboard.

At one point Padre Rodriguez said into his booming microphone something like “charismatico,” and everyone started waving their arms in the air. I wanted to be a good guest. So despite being rhythmically challenged, I got my hands up in the air and awkwardly swayed along. I looked out at Susan, who was holding her camera, and thought, “Don’t you dare take a picture of me now.” By the end of the week, I couldn’t have cared less.

We had a daily mass, usually about 7:00 in the morning. The band played at mass every day, and I felt the beauty and the power of it. I got over myself. That was renewing. I’m not saying that I want to have guitar masses or praise bands here, but there’s certainly a context where it’s alive and holy and deeply moving.

In my sermon the Sunday before we left on the trip, I quoted Henri Nouwen saying, “Nothing invigorates my faith more than a visit to churches in non-Western countries.” For me our trip was a tremendous renewal of faith, reflecting on what really matters in our relationship with God and with one another. In that way, it was kind of a ‘mini-Lent,’ a way to connect with our real needs in life, with what is essential.

I regret that we usually make negative, unpleasant associations with Lent, the self-denial, discipline, asceticism, repentance. Traditionally the Church has called it a ‘joyful season.’ Its fruits are learning, growth, reconciliation, new life. Until the thirteenth century, Lent was the word for spring. It signaled renewal and rejuvenation, blossoms blooming and sap flowing, the return of warmth and light. Lent can re-connect us to our deepest desires, for healing, for wholeness, for better relationships, for God.

The forty days of Lent give us a faint taste of Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness. Just before heading out to the desert, Jesus had been baptized and assured of God’s love for him. He then had this intense experience of vulnerability and weakness. In the wilderness, denying himself, Jesus learned what it means to be the beloved Son of God, what it means to have the Holy Spirit come down upon him, what S. Paul means by God’s power being made perfect in weakness. Without any crutches, in weakness and vulnerability, Jesus discovered what his baptism meant. Baptism ushers us into a new way of living.

The three temptations were to live contrary to our baptism. Satan tested Jesus. Will you perform miracles for your own well-being, your own comfort, your own safety? Will you rely upon anything other than God? Will you try to make God serve your own purposes? Will you seek your own power and glory? Will you divide your loyalty? Jesus rejects Satan’s offerings and thereby shows us the promise of baptism, the good news of what life in Christ can be like.

The first temptation seems like a practical suggestion, an act of common sense. “You’re hungry. You can make these stones bread. Take care of yourself.” Jesus recognized this as a temptation to doubt God’s care for him, to trust in himself instead of God. Satan tempted Jesus to doubt God’s presence with him because things were difficult for him at the moment. But Jesus recognized that the proper use of his power was not for his own benefit, but for the common good. During his ministry when Jesus performed a miracle, it didn’t help him, but rather it helped us. It healed us or taught us or provided for us.

The temptation to power, the temptation to try to control reality, may be where the Church has failed most spectacularly. With rich irony, the Church claims to follow Jesus who renounced all worldly advantage even while the Church has usually sought to increase its power, be it political, social, financial, even military power. It’s been jealous of its moral and spiritual power, sometimes trying to dictate and control choices, even thought and creativity. Jesus taught, but he didn’t compel people, he didn’t control people. He gave up power. He didn’t need power to proclaim the gospel and to minister to people.

Jesus asks us to love him. Our temptation is to seek power instead of loving one another, to try to control people instead of loving people, to substitute power for love. The temptation of power is that we don’t have to trust and rely upon God, that we don’t have to wrestle with uncertainty and doubt and instability, that we don’t have to seek understanding and unity with other people, that we don’t have to discomfort ourselves or exercise discipline and restraint. Power confuses us, making us think that we’re God.

The second temptation is for us to act irresponsibly. Satan tempts Jesus not to be accountable for his decisions. “Toss yourself down from the pinnacle of the Temple. Your daddy will take care of you.” Satan is suggesting that Jesus manipulate his Father, to get his Father to serve him.

We might think that this isn’t a issue for us. I wonder. I think of a New Yorker cartoon showing a bald old man, long hair, long beard, halo. He’s sitting behind a big, high desk like a judge, and he’s surrounded by clouds as if at the Pearly Gates. He’s looking on his computer screen, tapping on his keyboard, and talking down to another person, who has no halo and is humbly awaiting judgment: “You say ‘meek,’ but your records say ‘passive aggressive.’”

Trying to manipulate God, putting him to the test, making deals with him - these aren’t necessary. The good news is that even when things don’t go our way, we can be sure that God still loves us. We can be sure that he is doing better things for us than we can imagine or comprehend.

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Twohy, The New Yorker, 26 March 2007.

The third temptation is idolatry, making something more important than God. “I will give you all the kingdoms of the world if you fall down and worship me.” If you’ve been following the primaries, perhaps you’ve noticed, once or twice, a similarity here. Degrade yourself a little here, compromise your integrity a bit there, tell people what they want to hear instead of your convictions, and you might get the glory of the White House.

Jesus didn’t come to prove himself to us. He didn’t need our applause, our acclaim, our stardom, our glory. Jesus was wholly true to himself – undivided in his loyalty, worshiping and serving only God. Satan offers Jesus puny victories, gaining mere kingdoms, worldly glory. Jesus’ sights are higher. Jesus conquered sin and death. The good news is that through baptism we, too, can be part of that victory.

The underlying temptation of all these is to treat God as less than God. Since Adam and Eve, it’s been the human story. Lent is a time of repentance, of turning away from our old selves, of turning away from our old stories, of re-committing ourselves to the promise and the vision of our baptism. Jesus offers us a wholly different way of living. A holy Lent renews that life in us.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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