

FACE YOURSELF

2 Lent – March 13, 2011 Grace Episcopal Church, Haddonfield, NJ

Rev'd. Dr. Patrick R. Close

This first Sunday of Lent invites us to take up our Lenten journey by facing ourselves. All the readings show how we are tempted to place our will in opposition to God's will. During Lent we Have five Sundays and five encounters with Jesus. Today, Jesus faces the devil and his demons. Right from the start of his ministry, he is faced with choices and temptations. Just like Jesus, before we can deal with others out of our faith and mission, we must face our own realities.

Herb O'Driscoll writes that there are three themes in today's readings. The first is the call to face ourselves. This is the classical call of Lent to use the season and time for self-examination. Herb then says the next theme is an encounter with Jesus. Each time we meet the Christ we are presented with the opportunity for new life and birth. Furthermore, we have an opportunity to deal with what is dead in us and find life! Herb finally says that the readings today talk about crisis, how Jesus handles it and how we handle it.

This last theme strikes me uniquely. Do you know what the Chinese characters are for crisis? Their language doesn't have one single word for crisis. Instead, they use two words ... danger and opportunity! Each crisis we face has a moment of decision, choice and action. How we respond can place us in danger, or in an opportunity for something great. This is true from Adam and Eve to Abraham and Sarah to Moses to Mary and Joseph to Jesus to Peter and Paul and finally to us.

Let's look at the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis today. They had it all ... plenty of food, a garden, all their needs taken care of ... and all God gave them was one command. Wouldn't that be great! Just one thing to remember and do, just one command! All God said was **DON'T EAT THE FRUIT FROM THAT ONE TREE**. Well, we know what happens when we tell someone, like our children, don't do that ... they do it! Sigh. We still haven't learned.

The snake comes into the picture and tempts Adam and Eve. He says, go ahead, eat the fruit ... and you will **BE LIKE GOD!** Isn't that the continual and perpetual temptation that faced Jesus and faces us? We want to be God. After all, wouldn't it just be simpler if everyone did it my way? So Adam & Eve disobey God. But their actions have consequences ... and it's not what they expect. The first thing they feel is shame ... they are naked. Next, God comes into the garden and they hide, because they feel guilt.

It doesn't end there. When God asks what happened, Eve blames the snake, Adam blames Eve ... they don't accept responsibility for their actions, they look for an excuse, someone else to blame. How little things have changed for us. It's interesting to note, says Herb O Driscoll, that the Devil always tempts us with what we can't have and it diverts us from seeing what we already have!

Paul talks to us in his epistle about our will clashing with God's. Through Adam's choices, death comes into our lives. We make claims for ourselves and say, "I can do it myself!" The result is death. Jesus makes choices in his life where he sacrifices himself, he says, "I

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give myself.” His choices bring life into our lives. We live in the reality of both ways in our lives. The question is, “Who’s winning?”

Matthew’s Gospel shares with us the story of Jesus’ temptations. After his baptism and before his public ministry, Jesus is led into the wilderness for 40 days and nights. The devil comes and tempts him to be self-serving, to make choices for himself. First there is the temptation to turn stones into bread, to make the choices that are self-serving and self-satisfying. The next is the pinnacle of the Temple, the temptation to power, to rule over all. Finally there is the temptation to Lord over all of the kingdoms, to have the self-serving condition of image and status.

To each of these temptations, Jesus resists imposing his will. He turns down the snake’s, “You will be like God!” He chooses instead to let God’s will direct his life and mission. Jesus obeys, and turns each temptation aside. This is the way that Jesus invites to follow. Lent is our time in the wilderness, our time to face temptations. We are given the sight of our need for God and Jesus, our call to have not to the devil. We are reminded that our choices have consequences. The bad news is that we still will make bad choices. The good news is that Jesus knows and understands and we have a way out of it.

Today is my brother’s birthday. I am reminded of the nature of choices and temptations along with their consequences. My brother made the choices in his life to give into the temptation of drugs and alcohol. It leads to bad consequences over and over. It frustrated me in my trying to dissuade him from using them. It led me down a path of anger and boiled over into hate. My brother is the only person in my life that I have ever wanted to kill. The temptation came after a major fight and nearly ended in tragedy, for both of us.

My brother’s choices led him down a path to a dissolved marriage, no college, no decent job. It also came to the point that I stopped talking with him. But God did not stop with this. My brother came to the realization that he was traveling down the path to death. He finally turned to Alcoholic Anonymous. He was reborn. He recovered his life and turned away from the drugs and alcohol. The other thing that happened was he found Jesus and religion. Now the arguments about theology! (We’re still siblings who can easily go after each other!)

I’ve not talked with my brother in five years. It is weighing on me. I know how powerful the twelve-step program is in the lives of people. My brother has many years of sobriety now. We have drifted apart ... partially because he lives in Colorado. While I was preparing for the sermon this week, I came to the conclusion that I should call his. It’s time to reconnect. It’s my choice. The temptation is to just let things ride as they are now. But I sense God is pressing me to make a different choice.

The choices will keep coming in our lives. We will continue to be tempted, every day. We are people of faith and our baptismal vows say we are to confess, to seek forgiveness, to be reconciled. In the Prayer Book, there is that part of the baptismal liturgy where we are called to renounce Satan and all the evil powers that rebel against God. We are to follow

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Jesus' path and to say no to evil. Lent is the time when we are called to face ourselves, and to let go of the desire to impose our will over and against God. May God help us to live into this change of heart and make the choices that will lead us to life, not death.