

Tempted as We Are

Sunday will mark the First Sunday in Lent. We were reminded yesterday on Ash Wednesday that it was dust from which we came and it is to dust that we shall return. This is a humbling reminder that all of humanity is in fact made of the same substance.

We are invited to take this time to enter into in God's presence and allow ourselves to be stripped of all of the outward ways we try to define ourselves outside of who God created us to be.

We are asked to grapple with the simple fact that God created us out of God's infinite love to be a people of infinite love. The implications of that are often too much for us to handle.

This has always been humanity's greatest challenge. We cannot seem to grasp the fact that sharing the saving grace of God is our *only* call. In our hunger to be loved, feed our emptiness or "feel safe" or in control in an unpredictable world, we can unleash destructive forces in our lives.

This is one of the sweet invitations of our Lenten journey---to rediscover what it means to dwell at the heart of God and be unafraid of others in our world. We can remember that people unlike ourselves are not to be feared, but embraced as fellow children of God.

A holy Lent calls us to reawaken the ancient memory that our truest identity is that we are sons and daughters of God and to delight in that fact.

Living in this truth we are not ashamed to remember that we are all just dust---just like everything else on the planet. A time of *fearless* self-examination can give us new eyes to see one another as God sees us and to want for one another all of the wonderful things we want for ourselves and those we love.

This is the very heart of the Golden Rule.

God became flesh and lived among us. In Jesus God became flesh and by so doing faced life as we face life. Jesus knows our fear, our pain and our struggles and Jesus knows what is to be tempted to turn away from God's purposes.

This Sunday we will encounter a rich and vivid description of the temptation of Christ. We are allowed to see Jesus as he struggles in the wilderness. But the landscape is an interior one. We like to tell ourselves "the devil made me do it" but the gospel writer simply exposes Jesus' internal struggles with the things that would lure him away from his true self—from who God created him to be.

Jesus was alone there in the desert, alone with his demons just like of all of in trying times. The voice that tempted him was an inner voice, just like that taunting, destructive inner dialogue that whispers to all of us in our most difficult moments.

Sometimes this voice is enticing, sometimes cajoling, calculating, or scorning. This voice is different from God's because it talks to us of power and ruthless control, but it robs us of strength and peace—this voice often tells us to be or feel afraid and ashamed. Or conversely, this shadow voice will encourage us to project shame, hate, and destructive action against others. If we feel afraid or threatened or empty or lonely, surely some thing or someone else is to blame.

Satan is that *energy* that calls us away from God's mercy and purpose. The devil is "the slanderer"---the force that from the beginning of time has called and tempted humankind away from the light of God's truth into places of shadow and doubt.^[1]

This is the capacity in all of us for hardness of heart and un-forgiveness, and this is the force that lures the people of God into heartbreaking shame and tells us we are not worthy; that we are not enough just as we are.

What we call Satan is the dark shadow, most often born in fear, which seeks to unravel the good world that God created. Evil does exist in the world, it always has, God seems to make no excuse for it.

But what Jesus does tell us is that the primary way evil enters our world is through those aforementioned fears. 362 times he pleads, promises and pronounces, "Do not be afraid!"

^[1] Inspired by Joan Chittister

The call to be God's love in the world is a costly and demanding one; fear is a mind and soul killer and the largest stumbling block for God's people.

Jesus knows our struggle, our fear, our shame and pain, he even knows our pettiness and capacity to inflict pain on one another and we are still named as God's Beloved--we are still called to share God's love with a world in need; broken and fragile yes, after all we are people of dust and it is to dust we shall return.

But we are *God's* dust from beginning to end. Because of this we have God given potential and strength to be people of love and mercy, we have all we need to beat back the temptations of this life that lead us away from God.

The Lenten invitation is to focus on God's mercy not our sin. We are often not content to focus on just our own sinfulness, we lose our inward focus and want to point out the sin of others and that always ends in disaster. Keeping our eyes on God's grace and love for us and all others is the way to wholeness! In this Lenten season, I pray we may all enter into the wilderness filled with Spirit and come out at the end of our forty days renewed and strengthened —a people of God on fire to share God's wide merciful love with this world we live in.

Grace and Peace, Stephanie+