

**First Sunday in Lent (Lent 1B) – February 22, 2015**  
**Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15**  
**By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean**

**“The Human Best” at Odds with the “Holy Good”**

After having been baptized in the Jordan River and receiving, through the Holy Spirit, an affirmation of his identity as God’s Beloved Son, the same Holy Spirit immediately drives Jesus into the wilderness of Judea, having him spend forty days alone asking what it would mean to live into his identity and his role as the Beloved Son in carrying forth God’s mission of repairing the world and restoring all into right relationship. During Lent we too are called to ask what it means to be ourselves and how we as God’s beloved daughters and sons are to join with Christ in his ongoing repairing and restoring mission. And so, we read again the gospel lesson of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness—temptations to substitute some illusory notion of the *human best* in place of, and at odds with, the *Holy Good*. Sometimes the desire to be affirmed as the best can be the enemy of the good, and this is what Jesus had to battle with internally in the wilderness and throughout his public ministry. To get at the underlying attitudinal difference between the illusion of the human “best” and the reality of the Holy “Good,” I refer to Frederick Buechner who put it something like this:

“To do for yourself the [best] that you have in you to do—to grit your teeth and clench your fists in order to survive the world at its harshest and worst—is, by that very act, to be unable to let something be done for you and in you [and through you] that is [fundamentally good]. The trouble with steeling yourself against the harshness of reality is that the same steel that secures your life against being damaged or destroyed, secures your life also against being opened up and transformed by the holy power that life itself comes from. You can survive on your own. You can grow stronger on your own. You can even prevail [and be the best] on your own. But you cannot become human on your own.”<sup>i</sup>

To become fully human we have to go beyond steely self-sufficiency to rediscover the grace of dependency on God, and of interdependence with others. The trouble is that one of our most popular models for humanity is that of the self-made man or woman or the lone hero, the one who has reached the top, the one who fights and wins against all odds. The danger of this model lies in denying God and distorting our true being through a combination of great moral vigor yet with little self-knowledge. Or, as Reinhold Niebuhr once commented, “Ultimately considered, evil is done not so much by evil people, but by good people who do not know themselves”<sup>ii</sup>—that is, those who do not know the essence of their true humanity as being dependent on God and interdependent with all others, those who do not know or remember their beloved nature and that of others, their goodness and others’ goodness.

Mark’s account of Jesus’ time in the wilderness of Judea does not include the specific three temptations that the other gospels describe, so I’ll list them briefly. First, there’s the temptation to turn stones into bread; in other words, to be the most dazzling miracle worker out there appealing to instant gratification; to be the most immediate and relevant people pleaser in addressing, in this case, hunger (his own and others). To act like this is

to please, to be willing to be defined by others and their expectations, in order to be affirmed. In short, this is the temptation to be most relevant. Secondly, there's the temptation to have dominating power over all the kingdoms of the earth. This was built into many peoples' expectations of the coming of the Messiah Warrior King. This temptation doesn't necessarily mean using raw unaccountable power. It can simply be the temptation to have what could be called a "royal consciousness," which can take the form of neglecting those on the margins, or treating them from the basis and prerogatives of your power of privilege. In short, this is the temptation to be driven by power. And thirdly, there's Jesus' temptation to be sensational by engineering a miraculous rescue, were he to jump off the top of the Temple. With this goes the expectation that God will intervene and save Jesus. From our perspective it would mean that God will intervene and make it right, even if we abdicate our own responsibility and do destructive or self-destructive things. In short, it is the temptation to be spectacular and irresponsible. These were the temptations to somehow be the very best—at least in the eyes of others—and by which Jesus would fulfill his calling as God's Beloved Son, supposedly. But as the philosopher Voltaire stated, "The best is the enemy of the good."<sup>iii</sup>—so, Jesus worked through these temptations which would have, in fact, distorted and disconnected him from his real calling and good and true identity, had he succumbed to them.

Many people give in to these temptations to be most relevant, power-driven, or spectacular, and thus distort the fundamental truth and goodness of their own beloved nature. A few people have to wrestle with these temptations regularly, be they presidents, congressmen, governors, news anchors and other performers, or folk further down the pecking order. The lure of being the best in what we say or do can easily become that moral vigor that has little self-knowledge, as we become seduced by the belief that the "best" is what we have to be, even if it seems *too good to be true*, which it often is.

And not only those with strong egos are thus tempted. As writer and educator Parker Palmer points out, a more common temptation for many of us is to think of ourselves as never good or beloved enough, as more or less irrelevant, powerless and mundane.<sup>iv</sup> This temptation to feel only the poverty of spirit in ourselves—and to disregard the presence and power and purpose of God who calls each of us a beloved daughter or son—is the flip-side of the temptations felt by those in our world with stronger egos. Yet both contexts of temptation—from the stronger ego or the weaker ego—are rooted in the same illusion that we need what the devil is peddling if we are to be affirmed by others and lead lives of any consequence or worth. So, whether we lust after them or whether we regard them as out of reach, these devilish temptations—to seek self-affirming relevance, to be driven by power, to be spectacular—are, at the same time, the most common and popular images underlying our world and our lives. And yet, these are also the most misleading distractions to living a good life that is true to yourself—a life lived without undue anxieties of failing or succeeding, of receiving criticism or praise, of being accepted or rejected.

This reminds me of the image of a compass. As one observer put it,

"[We recall] William Blake's famous image of Urizen, the law-making demiurge [divine craftsman] who wields a [divider] compass [or protractor], [and] expresses through that instrument an extreme rationality that can restrict our imaginative horizons...[Then there's the] magnetic compass [which] symbolically evokes the

idea of navigating one's...course by conscious alignment with [some] invisible node. The magnetic compass is not, however, infallible...Similarly [our] internal compass can be affected by the proximity between conscious and unconscious, sometimes causing states of extreme disorientation. And how one typically orients oneself may need to be...revise[d] at the point where familiar and unfamiliar, or rational and non-rational [or adaptive and maladaptive, the good and the 'best'] aspects of life and personality come into polar conjunction [and we are either found to be way off course, or we find 'true north,' as it were]."<sup>v</sup>

Jesus' spiritual and moral compass saw through these temptations as being too good to be true. He realized his identity and his calling required of him only that he become comfortable in his own skin; that he respond faithfully to his own inner truth and goodness—his beloved nature, his "true north," as it were—and to the truth and goodness around him. And so, he renounced and resolved his temptations in the wilderness as he realized that the outcomes of his *own* actions would achieve whatever was possible, and that would be good enough. That GPS—that "God Positioning System"—that inner compass of God's Holy Good at work in him pointed him to a truer way than what relevance, power or spectacle might promise, but, in the end, could not deliver. Of course, these same temptations would dog him to his dying day.

In conclusion, this gospel text is chiefly a story about Jesus' identity and his calling to face and resist the temptation to substitute the illusion of the human "best" in place of the Holy Good. Insofar as we belong to Jesus, it is a story about our identity and calling too. Many voices call for our attention—voices such as the one that comes from within or without, that says, "Prove that you're a good person—again and again," like the voice that tempts Jesus to turn stones into bread. Another voice, from within or without, tells us, "Good isn't good enough. Be only the best. Be sure to become successful, powerful, popular," like the voice that tempts Jesus in those other ways. But underneath and through these distracting voices is a clear, quieter voice that says, "You are my beloved son, my beloved daughter, in whom I am well pleased. And you are *good*, and that's good enough!" That voice speaks to each one of us, and to all of us, and that's the voice we most need to listen for in our lives.

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<sup>i</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey* (New York: HarperCollins, 1982)

<sup>ii</sup> Quoted in William Sloane Coffin, *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin: The Riverside Years, Volume 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 534.

<sup>iii</sup> "Le mieux est l'ennemi du bien." - from Voltaire's *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (1764)

<sup>iv</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *The Active Life* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), pp. 99-119

<sup>v</sup> Quoted in "Compass" in *The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism*, Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin, eds., *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images* (Cologne, Germany: TASCHEN, 2010), p. 510.