

Lent 1B
February 21, 2021

During World War II, when the most urgent matters of the war needed attention, Prime Minister Winston Churchill would sometimes visit The United States, to address Congress, and meet with President Franklin Roosevelt in the White House.

Churchill had the odd habit of practicing his speeches in front of a mirror, in the nude. One evening Roosevelt who used a wheelchair, wheeled around the corner in the White House guest suite and there's Churchill in front of a mirror, completely naked, practicing his speech. Roosevelt caught his breath and said, "my apologies Mr. Prime Minister, I did not mean to interrupt."

Churchill turned on his heels to face Roosevelt, waved his hand, and replied, "On the contrary, the Prime Minister of England has nothing to hide from the President of the United States."

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, the season of the cross. A six-week spiritual journey into the wasteland of our souls, a time of cleansing and preparation before Easter. Lent is the season in which we strip away the exteriors of our lives. We give up that which we have to hide and take a long close look at ourselves in the mirror, at who we really are. Lent is the time in which the church commands us to talk about sin. It's as if the church says to us, before we can have our Easter joy, we must come face to face with our sinfulness, with who and what we are. According to Reinhold Neibuhr, sin is the most self-evident of Christian doctrines.

But it is language that is so foreign to most of us sophisticated, modern people. Sin has been badly translated over the years.

Usually when the word comes up, our minds drift to the last time we had an extra piece of cheesecake, or went gambling, drank a bit too much. But throughout the ages the church has claimed sin as something much more than a break in the moral code or a crack in our disciplined behavior. Rather, sin is something in which we are caught, enmeshed, stuck, a state of being if you will. We look around and see that the world is broken, it is not the way it should be, but sin is also inside of us. Like little insects caught in a spider web, sin is outside of us and inside of us, and we are all wrapped up in it.

In today's reading Jesus is led by the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. We hear the same story each year on the first Sunday of Lent, it is told in three different gospels, the story of Jesus' fasting and temptation in the desert.

Jesus is led out into the wilderness to fast by himself for 40 days and 40 nights, that's bible speak, for a longer time than any one of us would want to be alone in the desert with no food. As long as those hot days must have been, the chilly lonely nights were probably even longer. In today's reading you don't hear the details, but you probably know the story. The devil appears to Jesus, who is now vulnerable, hungry, tired, and alone, and tempts him. Jesus is tempted, put to the test, his identity and vocation are up for grabs. Would he be the one God called him to be? Or would he be swayed to be someone he was not, giving his gifts for selfish ends and worldly ambition?

At its root, sin is our desire to be something more than what we are, our desire to put ourselves in the place of God. I have a friend who says he discovered a long lost translation of Psalm 46, you know, the famous Psalm that says: “Be still and know that I am God.” My friend says in his translation the Psalmist writes, “Be still and know that I am God...and you aren’t.”

Sin attacks Jesus when he was at his hungriest, his loneliest, his most vulnerable. Jesus was tempted to misuse his God-given gifts, to become something that he was not. And this, I suggest, is the most damaging effect of sin, the temptation to become someone who we are not. The temptations are the strongest precisely in those places where we are the most gifted, in the times when we are the most vulnerable.

If the devil popped up wearing a red-suit with a pointy-tale carrying a pitchfork, we’d head for the exits, run for the hills. But sin tends to be much more subtle. I remember someone asking me one day, “do you believe in the devil?” To which I said, “absolutely.” She seemed somewhat surprised by this, and said, “oh yeah, what does the devil tell you?” And I quoted George McDonald: “the devil tells me exactly what I most want to hear, that I belong to myself.”

You may have heard the old story about the priest who went to the Harley Davidson dealer to buy a motorcycle. The salesperson came out to the parking lot, noticed him admiring the bike, and said: “that bike is the most powerful piece of machinery you’ll ever be seen on. It goes from zero to 60 in 5.8 seconds. Jet black fuel tank, chrome muffler, raised handle-bars. Can’t you see yourself, flying down the road, hair on fire, every woman’s head turning as you go by?” “What sort of work do you do?” the salesman asked. “I’m a Priest.” “Ah, this here motorcycle is the safest, most practical bike we’ve got on the lot. It comes with two helmets and free riding instructions.”

How does temptation work in our lives? It tells us exactly what we want to hear. What’s more than that, sin is slippery. Our greatest temptations come in the places where we are most gifted. The temptation is to use those gifts to satisfy our own desires. To be someone other than the person God created us to be.

One of the touching moments in the movie Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone, takes place in the attic of Hogwarts, the training school for gifted young wizards. In the dusty recesses of Hogwarts, Harry discovers the mirror named “Desire.” It is a magic mirror, that reflects back to the one standing before it the deepest desires of the heart. When Harry stands before the mirror he sees his reflection and standing behind him on his right and left are his mother and father, with him, the deepest desire of his heart. He feels a touch on his right shoulder and he looks, but there is nothing. He feels a touch on his left shoulder, and he turns, but there is nothing there either. They are gone. The wise wizard Dumbledore stumbles into the room at that moment and sees Harry staring into the mirror and says: “only when one looks into this mirror and sees oneself as one actually is, can he or she be accounted truly happy.”

My friends, this is the gift of Lent. It is a mirror of honesty and compassion, a 40-day mirror in which we can see ourselves for who we really are, a mirror that won’t tell us what we want to hear, but what we need to know. You are not self-made; you are God-made.

Look closely into the mirror of Lent these next 40 days. Strip away the external trappings, and see the image of God's beloved child, broken and yet beautiful, trapped in sin yet overwhelmed by grace.

And in the background of this 40-day Lenten journey of gut-level honesty, beckons the greatest desire of our hearts, an Easter of unending joy.

Amen.