

The First Sunday of Lent, 2014. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Many of you who were able to do so came to one of our Ash Wednesday services last week. Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, of course, so you'd expect the service to set a tone for the rest of the season. It does – though as I said on that day, it's a rather morose and depressing tone that it sets.

I also mentioned the Tuesday morning bagels program where Bill Adams pointed to the central originating intention for the season, one enshrined in what the Prayer Book refers to as “the observance of a Holy Lent”.

Within that invitation is this sentence: “*This season of Lent provided a time in which converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism.*”. Whatever Lent became, it began with a central goal of preparing candidates – catechumens – for baptism.

“Catechumen” is an interesting word; it simply means this: “one being instructed”. Those who wanted to join this new, secret religion we now call Christianity – and often take for granted – had first to be instructed in the central, core stories of the faith. Out of those core stories – of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, and the subsequent planting of faith by followers like Peter and Paul, came a vision of a particular way of living that captured the essence of following Jesus. If any individual was captured by those stories and, as Justin Martyr described it in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, came to believe “what we teach and say is true,” and were willing to “undertake to be able to live accordingly,” then they would be “instructed to pray and to entreat God”, after which, at what is now the Great Vigil of the Resurrection, they were brought to baptism. (Quotes from the 1<sup>st</sup> Apology of Justin Martyr, Chapter 61 C. 150 A.D.)

Each year in Lent we are, in some measure, repeating that journey that each of those first catechumens made. We are, in some measure, listening for what is true, and deciding, even if subconsciously, whether or not we can continue to “undertake to live accordingly”, whether we are willing to commit to this life of faith. This Lent, therefore, is about “the essentials”, what lies at the heart of who we are as people of faith.

It's in that context that we have this very familiar passage from Matthew's gospel, describing the Temptations of Jesus.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Century Mediterranean world had – in fact still has – a deeply rooted belief in spirits who exist in numbers too huge to count and whose major pastime was, they believed, interfering capriciously in daily human life. Spirits were everywhere, listening in on every conversation, always looking for an opportunity to meddle. So the 1<sup>st</sup> century – much like our own! – was a superstitious time.

What to do when confronted with meddlesome spirits?! Where's my lucky rabbit's foot?! Be very careful not to break that mirror, or walk under that ladder, or allow a black cat to walk in front of you!! Try looking for a 13<sup>th</sup> floor in a hotel, or row 13 on a plane!

The 1<sup>st</sup> Century had similar belief that certain objects, or even colors – blue was the favorite – could ward off these spirits – who, today, we might call “bad luck”.

In Matthew’s story of Jesus, God has just expressed profound and exuberant confidence in Jesus: “This is my beloved son, with whom I am well-pleased”. No reader of his gospel would have thought anything else but that right after this, the nosey spirits – who would have overheard every word – would try and test Jesus, to see if God’s compliment was, in fact, true!

Knowing this, it should be no surprise to you either that the very next scene Matthew presents after the Transfiguration on the mountain top is “the temptations”. Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit. He was led by a good spirit into the wilderness, the normal habitat of spirits, where he did battle with an evil spirit, the devil.

What *is* surprising in Matthew’s narrative is that Jesus is not reported to be wearing blue garments or using an amulet or even speaking special ritual language formulas for protection. Instead, he engages in direct one-on-one dialogue with this evil spirit in a Scripture-quoting contest.

Now you know about the sprits! We have this story here in part because it invites questions, the first of which being “what’s Matthew’s purpose here?” Matthew’s purpose in this story is to present Jesus as the faithful and obedient Son of God, just as he was presented in the baptism story (Mt 3:13-17).

And there’s another purpose, too, and a quite deliberate one: to contrast the obedient son, Jesus, with Exodus’s story of Israel the disobedient son.

Yes, we have this gospel today in part because we’re at the beginning of Lent (almost!) And Lent has 40 days, so the reference to Jesus spending 40 days in the wilderness seems – at the least – to be appropriate.

But if Lent is primarily about preparation for baptism, then it’s here for another reason, too. Matthew’s answering an unspoken question that he expected any inquiring mind to ask: “***Why should I believe in Jesus?***” I’d say that’s still a lively question to ask as we begin another Lent!

Matthew gives a culturally appropriate answer that might not carry as much weight for us, but which was very powerful in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries in the Mediterranean world, the answer I mentioned above: ***Jesus is a model of obedience to God.*** He emerges victorious from his combat with the devil. He can safeguard and maintain his honor and avoid shame.

And, Matthew makes it clear, until his arrest, trial, and death, no one—human or spirit—succeeds in shaming him, tripping him up, or causing him to fall from his stated position and goals. ***This, Matthew tells us, is the consequence of unflinching obedience to God.***

For us, of course, the idea that spirits cause us any problems isn’t “mainstream”! But that question – “why should I believe in Jesus?” – that’s a question that more and more people are

asking.

Quite a few are not finding an adequate answer to that question. This Lent, I invite you to ask that question. As we go forward, I hope over the next few weeks we can find some answers that will allow us to come to the celebration of Easter with our faith strengthened and our commitment renewed. Will you join me?