

Date Preached	06-Mar-2022	Date Initiated	22-Feb-2022
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Lent 1, Yr C

" 'If you are the Son of God, [*then*] command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' "



On Ash Wednesday, we talked about sin—about how it remains an issue for us: *not* because God hasn't forgiven us or Jesus may 'un-save' us—God has, and Jesus won't!—but because our sinful natures constantly bend us more and more selfward ... and, thus, away from God's grace: away from the deeper, more loving relationship Christ desires for us, both with Him and with all others. We observed that the calling of Lent is for us to reconcile ... to re-connect ourselves with ... God, once again.<sup>1</sup>

With this understanding of sin's inhibition of the will God has in mind for us ... and of Lent's invitation to spiritual renewal and reorientation ... during the Sundays **in** Lent,<sup>2</sup> we'll be taking a closer look at 'sin,' using, each week, some very familiar words from the General Confession: WE HAVE SINNED AGAINST [GOD] IN **THOUGHT, WORD, AND DEED**: BY WHAT WE HAVE DONE, AND BY WHAT WE HAVE LEFT **UNDONE**. We begin, today, with **THOUGHT**.

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It is one of the most dramatic scenes in the Gospels: Jesus facing off with the only power He encounters on earth that stands even a *chance* of besting Him.<sup>3</sup> Three times the devil<sup>4</sup> tempts Jesus ... urges Him to consider how the world could be better for Him, and then to *create* that world. "If You are the Son of God, *then* You shouldn't have to fast. If You will worship me, *then* You can rule the whole world. If You're the Son of God, *then* You can hurl Yourself from a rooftop without getting hurt."

Both the setting and casting of this scene are critical. The wilderness (or desert) is an arid, empty, open space ... full of possibility and danger; of mystery and meander. And Jesus and the devil are strictly *tête-à-tête*: There is no one to overhear, react or contribute to their dialogue. It takes place in a vacuum. The devil, in essence, asks Jesus to imagine an earthly life—to create a mental image of peoples and powers and prizes—that bolster Jesus' own human interests ... that serve His human need for confirmation of self.

Now, because of its characters' identities, the scene plays out in a cosmic dimension. But if we strip it down to its bare essentials, the devil is really enticing Jesus to live in a world of His own

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<sup>1</sup> For the avoidance of doubt: God doesn't go anywhere; God's hand always lies outstretched toward us. The decision (or intention) is for us to uncurl ours once again toward God.

<sup>2</sup> The Sundays between Ash Wednesday and Holy Saturday occur *in* (*i.e.*, fall within) Lent but are not *of* (*i.e.*, constitute no part of) Lent.

<sup>3</sup> I am not necessarily declaring that the outcome of Jesus' encounter with the devil was equivocal. Rather, the inherent drama of the moment is much higher here than when Jesus squares off against various social, religious and political powers of the day, later in Luke.

<sup>4</sup> Only St Luke does not refer to him as Satan.

IF / THENS ... His *own* human thoughts and opinions about what *should be* ... rather than the IS of reality—the IS of God. The core temptation of Christ, I'd argue, is power the devil offers Him to make His own thoughts into a personal reality.

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We live in a culture that prizes freedom of thought and the transformation it can bring about: In our history, this freedom has been an engine of liberty and democracy ... of charity and justice ... of generosity and self-sacrifice. The Bill of Rights ... the Emancipation Proclamation ... our exploration of the solar system: All sprang from the thoughts and opinion of individuals who saw the potentialities that lay hidden in creation and dared to realize them.

But our thoughts and opinions can lead us in another, more sinister direction, as well.

- When we encounter people who vex or stymie or disappoint us, we can develop ways-of-thinking that justify our negative feelings: *if* a colleague makes frequent mistakes, he must be stupid or lazy; *if* an acquaintance is that unsophisticated—or that posh, I can't befriend her; *if* my spouse won't act more compatibly with me, then maybe this marriage is over.  
>> The devil tempts Jesus to convert the rock that is of no use to Him into something that will make Him more comfortable. Do our thoughts not so tempt *us*, as well?
- When we have a hard time understanding or empathizing with someone, we can think up reasons to 'other' them ... to distance or dismiss them: *if* someone of another race or ethnicity or religion is too unlike us, then we need not build rapport with them; *if* another's level of education or standing in society or profession is too low—or too high, then they're are incapable of offering us anything of value; *if* we encounter political views that differ radically from ours, then we can we 'cancel' those who hold them, because reaching any common ground must be hopeless  
>> The devil tempts Jesus not to approach the world in a spirit of humble and mutual co-existence, but to control and judge and rule it. Do not our thoughts so tempt *us*, as well?
- When we are bored or anxious or lonely or despondent, we can fall to imagining a slew of scenarios that would have avoided or prevented our current suffering: *if* God loved us, our parent wouldn't have died or our child wouldn't walked out of our lives; *if* God were just, the job we deserved ... or deserved to keep ... would be ours today; *if* God cared, the cancer our best friend would have been cured or our retirement fund wouldn't be nearing depletion  
>> The devil tempts Jesus to demand that God intervene—to show God's love in a demonstrable way that would remove any ambiguity of faith. Do not our thoughts so tempt *us*, as well?

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Three times, the devil says IF to Jesus: invites Him to think the other ... the world ... indeed, to think *God* ... in the way that's most comfortable and advantageous for *Himself*. And three times, Jesus looks the devil in the eye and says "not IF, but IS"—the IS of reality ... the IS of Creation ... the IS of God. Refusing to fall back on His own individual perceptions and values, Jesus prays God into this

scene in the wilderness. He subordinates His human will and desire to God's. "Not My will," He prays, "but *Thine* be done" (Lk 22:42).

When, in the wilderness of our minds, the IF of our thoughts and opinions and dreams repeats and reverberates, it leads us in the sinful direction of *self*, rather than God. Our IF creates and confirms biases and blinds that emanate from *our* wills and not God's; from *our* desires and not Christ's; from our earth-bound perspectives and not the Spirit's holiness.

The invitation of Lent, then, is to follow Jesus' model in the wilderness: to turn our hearts; look *past* the IF of our own selves and to the IS of God; and pray for God's help to defeat the sinful wilderness of our thoughts alone; to answer their temptation with Jesus' earnest prayer: "not my will, but *Thine* be done."



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