

May the Words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen

I've read that there's a trend among some Christian groups to deny the existence of the devil or what is also called the tempter. Apparently, some people look on the concept of the devil as being unsophisticated or unenlightened. The problem here is that, in real life, we don't encounter a character of the devil with a pitchfork and red horns that we might see on a Halloween costume. Our encounters with the tempter are far more subtle, just as it was for Jesus in today's Gospel lesson.

One of the aspects of this passage is that it addresses a very profound theological question about whether Jesus was both divine and human in one body. If Jesus was strictly divine, then the devil wouldn't have had any power over him. But, if Jesus was only human, the devil wouldn't have bothered to try to tempt Jesus with these tests. However, theologically, Jesus is described as being both completely human and fully divine, all at the same time. I've read that this concept was not easily reached because, during the first few centuries of Christianity, there was a lot of bitter arguing about it. Some people were even judged to be heretics over this question before an agreement was reached. The Council of Constantinople in 381, finally tried to answer the question of Jesus divinity when the phrase, "of one Being with the Father" was included as a portion of the Nicene Creed. However, even today, there are subtle differences in the way that some of the various branches of Christianity understand this doctrine.

I can just imagine how hard it must have been for Jesus when he encountered the tempter. He had been out in the wilderness alone and fasting for forty days. When Luke wrote about the wilderness in this passage, he was talking about an area of the Holy Land that is still extremely hot, dry and forbidding. Since Jesus is also human, he was weak from hunger and thirst. His skin was probably burned and he's most likely suffering from exposure to the heat. In short, he was vulnerable to every possible temptation and the devil came onto the scene at this point to tempt Jesus. But this isn't the type of devil that we might see at Knotts Scary Farm, it's the real thing. This is the sneaky devil who specializes in subtle trials, tests, and temptations.

If we want to better understand the methods of this tempter, we have to consider our own moments of weakness. Have you ever felt really hungry? Maybe we've had to fast to prepare for some medical procedure or if we've decided to go on a diet to lose weight. So, in our own minds, we're more than a little hungry and all we can think about is food and then we hear that sneaky little devil of a tempter in the

back of our head saying, "Go ahead, there's that piece of chocolate cake out there in the kitchen. Just one little bite won't hurt and you'll feel so much better." And that might be after a relatively short time and probably not even a full day. I think that, after forty days, there was probably that same kind of little voice in the back of Jesus' head. That's the devil at work that Luke was talking about. This is the tempter that uses logic on us in our weakest moments and is the real devil. It's incredibly important for us to remember this devil as we think about this Gospel Lesson. As humans, this is the tempter that comes to us when we're the most vulnerable.

I think that what the devil was trying to do was to separate the divine in Jesus from the human. He was trying to bring God down to our human level but the surprise here is that God, in the person of Jesus, had already come to our level to be among us, because Jesus is fully divine AND fully human. Jesus, was encountering what we encounter every single day of our lives. Jesus was experiencing the subtle trials, the tests and the temptations of the devil at a moment of Jesus' greatest weakness.

We can read this Gospel passage as a great triumph of Jesus over the devil and the forces of evil but we can also think of it as a moment in Jesus' on-going mission to save us from our sins. This is such a wonderful part of the Good News of Christ Jesus because we are being told that God completely understands what we, God's children, have to face at the hands of the tempter.

If Jesus were only divine, he would never have had to face the devil's temptations that we humans have to face in our weakness. He would never have known what it is to experience the devil's power from a human standpoint. Similarly, if Jesus were only human, then God would never have had the opportunity to better understand our experience when we encounter the tempter with his tests.

That's why the concept that Jesus is both human and divine is so very important to our own faith journey. It enables Jesus to understand our human experiences as God. It's the fact that Jesus is both completely human and fully divine which makes Christianity so different from all of the pre-Christian mythologies. Only in Christianity does God love us so much that he came down to earth to be one of us so that God would truly know and understand what we experience in our life.

And think about how the tempter went after Jesus. The devil first hits Jesus in his overwhelming hunger, when he's physically the weakest. The tempter says, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." I think

that, without doubt, Jesus had the power to do this and, since Jesus is fully divine, the temptation to use his God given power must have been incredibly strong. This temptation was directed toward the human nature in Jesus and his physical hunger pains. Given the fact that he is also fully divine, this test is all the more powerful and is far more powerful than anything that we'll ever experience. But Jesus resists and says, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

And this statement also has a deep meaning for us. If we don't live by bread alone, what do we live by? Our physical, earthly lives are certainly sustained by physical food but our spiritual and eternal lives are sustained by spiritual food, which is the bread of life. We get this spiritual food from the word of God. In his Gospel, Luke is telling us what we need to have in our lives in order to have eternal life.

So, the tempter goes after Jesus a second time. This time, there is even more subtlety in the temptation but it has nothing to do with Jesus' immediate physical weakness. It has everything to do with the devil's perception of a potential future weakness. He offers Jesus the glory and authority over all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus will simply worship the devil.

Here again, the tempter is going after the human fear in Jesus. Jesus has seen what's in his future in order to bring us to salvation and Jesus also sees the cross that is looming plainly in that future. What would we do to avoid a fate that involves a horrible, excruciatingly painful, death? Again, we must consider that Jesus is both human and God. This temptation is directed at the human nature of Jesus which brings about more understanding of us as humans. It is the human nature of Jesus that resists the tempter in order to serve God, and it is the nature of Jesus that gains God's understanding of what it takes for us to resist.

And then the devil tests Jesus a third time. He takes him to the top pinnacle of the temple, and says, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you.'"

How often do we do we put God to the test in our most vulnerable moments? In Jesus' extremely weakened condition, I think that, with his human nature, it would have been very easy for Jesus to give in to this temptation and just seek the comfort of angels. But his human nature still refuses to test God and Jesus has gained even more first-hand understanding of what it is like to be human.

A number of years ago, when Momi and I were attending another church, we were involved with an outreach program that lifted up people with histories of the various addictions. We saw first-hand how the tempter worked in their lives and in

ours. They knew how easy it would have been for them to relent to temptation. This program helped them to see God's love for them and to strengthen their resolve to resist the tempter and, with God's help, to live clean and sober lives -one day at a time. The very end of the Gospel lesson is very indicative of the character of the tempter when it said, "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him UNTIL AN OPPORTUNE TIME."

This understanding is the essence of this lesson and that God knows what it is like to be human. God knows our weaknesses first hand, because God came to us when Jesus lived and died as one of us. And with that understanding comes salvation through the sacrifice of God's only Son. God knows that we are not strong enough in our faith to come up to God's expectations, so God comes down to us and lifts us up in love. In the faithfulness that comes to us through the work of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, the tempter has no chance in our lives.

But we also need to recognize the subtlety of how that sneaky devil works in our lives. The tempter is real. His trials, his tests, and his temptations are very real and they're also very subtle. But we also need to know that the Good News in Christ is that God knows each one of us by name and that God understands us. We are marked with the sign of the cross of Christ. We ARE loved, we ARE forgiven and we ARE saved.

As St. Paul wrote in in the book of Romans," For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

May the love of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds on Christ Jesus who took on our humanity so that we might be saved. Amen