

“Listening with Your Eyes”

4:00PM, IHM

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Each time we enter upon the Lenten Season, the church invariably holds up to us a gospel story relating to what are called the “temptations” of Jesus, three versions presented by each of the Synoptic writers: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Today it’s Matthew’s turn. To understand today’s gospel, you need a special lens, a way of seeing that is called “Midrash.” Midrash was a form of Biblical commentary popular in Jesus’ day. Rabbis interpreted the history of Israel by creating fanciful stories related to Scriptural texts, in this case the history of Israel in the desert.

Whoever wrote the Gospel of Matthew was highly skilled in presenting “Midrash.” On the surface, the narrative seems to be presenting an event of history: “At that time Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil (Matthew 4: 1).” If so, who witnessed this event? Apparently no one was with Jesus and we have no evidence that Jesus later reported on what had happened. There is no question that Jesus experienced a testing by the devil. In his passion, Jesus cries out, quoting Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me (Mark 15: 34)?” Bystanders taunt Jesus, saying: “You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, if you are the Son of God (Matthew 27: 40.)”

Matthew’s gospel views Jesus as a new Moses; Jesus relives in his life the history of Israel. Israel spent forty years in the Sinai desert, with repeated failures to trust in God. Jesus is a true Son of God who spends forty days in the desert confronting the same power of evil, sorely tested, but never succumbing. The clue to today’s Midrash is to note that each of the temptations of Jesus relates to Israel’s experience. The Book of Deuteronomy (cp 8:2-3) speaks of how the people were hungry for bread. God promised to give them manna from heaven, but they wanted God to turn stones into bread immediately rather than having them wait for manna. At the end of his fast, Jesus was hungry (famished says one translation). The devil tells Jesus: “If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread.” Jesus refuses to abuse his power. He

upholds his trust in God to provide for him in his own time. Faithful Jesus is the opposite of faithless Israel.

While in the desert, people complain that God is neglecting them. At Massah and Meribah, they issue an ultimatum: “Is God in our midst or not?” If you are, prove it! They try to manipulate God, challenging him to uphold his covenant promise to protect them from danger. The devil treats Jesus in a similar way: “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down.” God will send his angels to protect you. Jesus answers: “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.”

At the time of Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion, Judas tries to tempt Jesus to save himself. Judas betrays Jesus, thinking that he will have to use his power to save himself. In effect, Jesus tells Judas: “You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.” Though powerful as the Son of God, Jesus refuses to use that power to save himself.

Finally, when Israel was in the desert, the people were willing to worship other gods, a golden calf. Their loyalty to God was compromised, divided. When asked to worship the devil, commit idolatry, Jesus said to him: “Get away, Satan! The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve.”

In many different ways, we are tempted as was Israel, to ask for bread right now, rather than acknowledging that God will provide for us on his own terms. We also show our doubts by challenging God to rid the world of evil in our lifetime. “Is God in our midst or not?” Why doesn’t God eliminate poverty and disease and natural disasters and corruption in high places? Finally, why not worship other gods – for the sake of fame or pleasure or power? Our God seems not to care. We call out and he doesn’t answer.

Lent is our testing time, a time to examine the ways in which we are tested. We have the example of Israel in the desert and the example of how Jesus faced the same temptations and overcame them. Our temptations take a different form. Let me present an example of a temptation that is becoming more and more common in our culture, so different from that of Israel of old.

We begin with a story. A mother named Sue was standing at the kitchen sink, working diligently on dinner preparations, her mind committed to the task at hand, peeling potatoes. She kept her eye on her i-phone nearby and occasionally looked out the window to see what the neighbors were up to. Her middle son, three-year-old Stephen, was playing nearby. Within a few moments, she felt a tug on her skirt preceded by the words, "Mommy." She nodded something like "un-huh," or "yes?" and went on peeling the potatoes and glancing outdoors. There were more tugs on her skirt and more little sounds, "Mommy." Again she gave a brief verbal comment and yet stayed right at her task.

Five minutes passed. Stephen continued to chatter and then she felt those tugs on her skirt again. This time the tugs seemed harder and more persistent. She finally put her potatoes down in the sink and bent down to her son. Stephen took her face in his two little chubby hands, turning her directly to his line of vision and said, "Mommy, will you listen to me with your eyes?" Will you pay attention to me?

Our culture is afflicted with what might be called "partial attention syndrome." We have so many tasks to accomplish at once that we are unable to devote our time to just one. Worse, for more and more people, the addiction to instruments of technology (i-phones, texting, chat rooms, browsers, search engines) occupy so much attention, becoming an ingrained habit, that people nearby are more like objects standing in the way. Sherry Turkle, in her book, *ALONE TOGETHER; Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other,* affirms that "We seem determined to give human qualities to objects and content to treat each other as things."

Thomas Friedman, author and columnist for The New York Times, remembers riding in a taxi in Paris with his African-born driver who talked ceaselessly on a phone while watching a dashboard mounted TV. Meanwhile, in the back seat, Friedman typed on a laptop while listening to an iPod. "Technology is dividing us as much as it is uniting us," he reflects. The taxi cab driver could have been talking to relatives in another continent and Friedman was sending a story to New York, yet the two of them communicated hardly at all. And both were sitting two feet from each other.

That's the temptation of our day, not that of Israel spending forty years in the desert or Jesus' forty days, but that of treating objects as more important than persons.

A final example. One of my goals as a hospital chaplain is to follow little Stephen's advice, to listen to people with my eyes, to give them my undivided attention. On entering a patient's room, I first greet them by name (oh, he knows who I am!) and then tell them my name, holding out my hand in a greeting and looking them straight in the eye. More often than not, a patient will grasp my hand closely, and not let loose. We might visit for quite some time, hands locked together. For me, that kind of response means that the patient is assured that here is someone who is here for me, not someone afflicted by "partial attention disorder."

Here's a Lenten suggestion: resolved to give undivided attention to whomever I are speaking with, rather than succumbing to the temptation of our day.

In recent years, at the beginning of Lent, I have made it a custom now of pointing to the shrine in our worship area depicting Christ in the desert, a beautiful sculpture depicting Jesus returning from his desert experience, victorious over his adversary, prepared to lead his people through the on-going power of the Holy Spirit. In the quiet of this place, spend some time in this year's Lent, before this statue, listening with your eyes with undivided attention, holding up to Jesus the particular testing time that is your experience. Ask the Holy Spirit to make you victorious, as Jesus was. "Get away, Satan!"