

**The First Sunday of Lent
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Oscar Wilde, in his inimitable style, once quipped: “Only the shallow really think they know themselves.” Hold onto that thought as we begin another Lenten season.

Forty days are set aside every year in order for us to be able to go deep within our hearts, to go deep within our own desert place, to understand how much we need forgiveness from each other and from God. Forty days are set aside for us to turn ourselves around a bit (the root meaning of the word repent). It is an opportunity to go deeper and deeper each year into ourselves, into our own psyches, our own spirit, and to emerge with a *metanoia*, the Greek word for repentance, a change of heart and mind.

Welcome to the desert again. The desert, or wilderness, is a metaphor in many religious traditions. It is often associated with loneliness and struggle. The desert is a metaphor for that inward journey of self-discovery, an invitation to look honestly at ourselves and at our own temptations or trials. And so every year on the first Sunday of Lent, the church proclaims a gospel about Jesus’ temptations and trials. And every year we hear a first reading about God’s Covenant, God’s Promise to be with us—even in the

trials. This year we hear of the Covenant with Noah, and hear again of the rainbow placed in the heavens as the sign of that Promise.

But we are reminded every year that even Jesus had his temptations, had his trials, had his vulnerabilities. Only he probably really knew them—just like you and I only really know our own temptations. They are different for each of us. When Matthew and Luke tell their version of this story, they fill in the gaps. They both have Satan offering three specific temptations: to power, to misusing his authority, to becoming more than he really was in the eyes of others. Mark, in typical fashion, is spare and sparse. Mark invites us to use our own imaginations. All he says is that Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness and tempted for forty days, and that there are wild beasts and angels with him.

Mark bets that if you look into yourself, you will know exactly what tempted Jesus. Mark knows that all real temptations are essentially the same for us all: we are tempted to be dishonest with ourselves and with others. We are tempted to “pretend” to be someone you are not, or to pretend not to be someone who you are. We are tempted to remain somehow “phony,” not to live in the skin of our own unique and authentic self. These are temptations most of us face. And Jesus was no exception.

In the end, in a short-hand way of speaking, life itself is finally a question of becoming free enough to become the person I am created to be. Free enough to become like Jesus. Free enough to love fearlessly, to risk generously, even to fail boldly. In the end then, all Lent asks of us is not to remain shallow.

Lent is also an invitation to re-focus ourselves. An invitation not to become distracted from what life is really about, to keep our eyes on the ball. And the gospels remind us that even Jesus was not exempt from that very human challenge to stay focused, not to become distracted.

This is serious stuff, more serious than it might at first appear from the gospel story. The gospel story is not intended to be a quaint story about some literal Devil with big horns and a long tail. People can become easily distracted by the story itself.

Nor are today's "temptations" about what most people think: it has nothing to do with sex or food! In Mark's gospel, Satan has bigger fish to fry—far bigger than either sex or food. This is a cosmic struggle; the stakes are high. And the struggle belongs to us all.

As theologian John Shea puts it: "Satan is the inner, invisible energy of people, groups, and social and political structures that inflict suffering on

people. This adversary of God manifests itself through these people, groups, and social and political structures—and turns them into wild beasts who devour God’s good creation.” Forget your picture of some Halloween ghost costumed in black tights with red horns and a big tail. Trust me, Jesus is not being asked to kneel down before a Halloween figure.

There is a brutal struggle here that Mark only hints at. A struggle in which Jesus is called to explore his own inner landscape, to explore options for his public life, to explore just how the real kingdom of God will come to be. Jesus needs to make choices. And he does—and never turns back. Just as you and I have to make choices, decisions about our lives. And pray that we have the same courage in Christ Jesus to never turn back ourselves.

The gospels are unrelenting in reminding us that there is a battle being waged out there—and in here. The invitation is to stay focused—focused on ourselves and our trials, focused on him “who is our life, our breath, and in whom we have our being.” There is always more to learn. Remember Oscar: “Only the shallow really think they know themselves.” Repent! Don’t be afraid to “turn yourself around” a little. And welcome to another Lent.