

*Come Holy Spirit; comfort us, convict us, convert us, and lead us into all truth. Amen.*

I used to be a fan of spaghetti westerns. These were movies set in the American West, but made in Italy, where it was cheaper to film. They weren't so much about cowboys and Indians as outlaws and ranchers, some good, some bad. The names say it all – "Once Upon a Time in the West," "A Fistful of Dollars," and the classic, "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly." Clint Eastwood was in most of them – called "The Man With No Name," with a black hat and a Mexican poncho and a quick draw on his gun. Though he was no saint, he often defended the defenseless and stood up to the forces of evil, be they rancher or outlaw.

I'm not casting Clint Eastwood as Jesus, but our Gospel today brings to mind these westerns – the barren landscape, shimmering heat, the sound of a rattlesnake slithering by – and the adversaries, Good Guy and Bad Guy, facing each other down at the climax: Showdown in the Desert. Only in our story, this is not the climax – this is the beginning. God, the master story-teller, knows you have to introduce main characters and main conflicts early, and then follow them as the story unfolds. So here's the first thing that happens after Jesus is anointed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, "*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he is tempted by the devil.*"

There's a whole lot crammed into that one sentence: Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit – he didn't go without resources; He went with God. He was led into the wilderness. this was no random occurrence, nor his own idea. "Oh, I think I'll go toughen myself up for a while in the desert." This was the next step in Jesus' living out his identity as our Lord and Savior. And He is tempted by the devil for forty days. And now when it's over, maybe his defenses are lower, here comes the worst.

Now why would this be necessary for Jesus? He's Lord of all, isn't he? Why should he have to play games with the Devil? Well, one reason could be, "know your enemy." Our story is one of Satan wreaking havoc with a human race weakened by sin. Jesus came to set us free.

He came in human nature to set us free.

In this mission Jesus' primary adversary was the Devil. Maybe he submitted to this period of trial so he would know where we live, what we endure, we who are not so good at resisting temptation. That was why God took on human form in the first place – to lead us into freedom from within our condition, not just point the way from above. And in this first showdown, Jesus politely listens, firmly resists.

Jesus was able to stand his ground where we so often cave.

Which brings up a big question: Was this a fair fight?

Did the Devil ever have a chance, or did Jesus hold all the cards? Everything rides on this question, and on the answer being yes, it was a fair fight. Because if Jesus' "God-ness" swamped His "human-ness" in this encounter, or anywhere else during his life and death, then we're out of luck. If Jesus just "drew on his super-powers" in a pinch like this, we're toast. If it gets reduced to us trying to be like Jesus, when he wasn't truly one of us, we're condemned to trying and failing and trying and failing.

Our whole story, the whole claim of the Christian Good News rests on Jesus' human-ness being complete and thorough. He was fully God, but also completely and fallibly human, and that means that, yes, the possibility had to be there for him to fail. The real risk of God taking human form, was not just that He was born a vulnerable infant and grew up with all the contingencies we humans face. The biggest risk was that He had the full range of choice available to us, and that He could have chosen otherwise at any time. A popular song of a few years ago asked,  
*What if God was one of us, just a slob like one of us...*

Well, He was. Jesus, the Spirit-begotten Son of God was also fully human. That means he could be liable to temptation. He could have fallen. Jesus had the same freedom of choice that we do. The same. He also had the same resource for back-up that we do – the Holy Spirit. The Spirit was there, not controlling Him, but strengthening Him, reminding Him who he belonged to. That same power is there for us, every single day of our lives, we have Christ's own Spirit, the Holy Spirit, living in us. There's power there that we can draw on, as that Spirit strengthens our spirits.

The Spirit reminds us who we are, that we are children of God, not by our own doing, but because God has said so, and has adopted us through Christ.

Jesus may have been cold, hungry and alone, but He knew who he was.

The devil kept trying to sow doubt about that, "If you are the Son of God..."

Jesus didn't play. He knew he was the Son of God.

Notice he never actually says, "No," to the devil's suggestions either.

He just turns them back at him, and talks about obeying God.

It's not so hard, when we stay rooted in who we are, and draw on the Spirit for help!

*"The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart,"* we heard in our epistle today.

God gives us what we need to resist the doubts that the devil whispers to us.

The three areas where the devil tries to "get" Jesus are:

- ◆ Substance – "Do you have enough food, enough sustenance? Get more!"
- ◆ Sovereignty – "Who's in charge of the world? Who's got the power, control?"
- ◆ Security – "Who's gonna protect you? How can you be safe?"

These three areas pretty much cover our condition:

- ◆ We want to be filled, at all times.
- ◆ We want to be in control of our lives.
- ◆ We want to know we are safe. It is these needs – that God alone can truly satisfy – that make us vulnerable to temptation to turn away from God.

The devil doesn't merely tempt us to break the rules – that would be too easy.

He tempts us to mistrust God, to follow the wrong voice.

Jesus recognizes that it isn't God speaking to him; God doesn't bargain with us or cause us to doubt His love and mercy. If it's not of love, it's not of God.

God calls us her beloved children, to be secure in that identity, and to live out the purposes for which each one of us is here.

When we stand firm in who we are as redeemed sinners, children of the living God, the devil has nowhere to go with us. He only gets a foothold when we doubt that.

How do advertisers get to us? They make us doubt we're pretty enough,

clean enough, successful enough, cool enough. If we believed that we are all those things, we would only buy things we actually needed.

(Maybe that would kill the economy... but we could build a healthier one!)

Same thing with temptations from the devil – if we believe God's promises and put our security in them, the devil can whisper all he wants; we're not buying.

Do you know who you are? We all carry a lot of identity cards – wife/husband, son/daughter, brother/sister, executive/artist, teacher/healer, reader/sailor... But do you know who you are most deeply, your primary identity as God's child? Maybe this Lent can be a season for getting more deeply in touch with that, so that we aren't so easily swayed by the temptation to be someone we're not.

Lent can be a wilderness time if we let it. The wilderness can be a harsh place.

It can have beauty and stillness; it can be place of danger and deprivation.

For the people of God, the wilderness is a place where we meet God.

If we disconnect a little, maybe cut off from our devices for hours or days, we can become aware of all the ways we try to feed ourselves, or over-feed ourselves, and instead rely on God to provide for us.

We can become aware of all the ways we try to assert control over our lives and the world around us, and instead submitting again to God's sovereignty.

We can become aware of the huge premium we place on feeling safe and secure, and get back in touch with the fact that really, we aren't;

that we have to trust God for the breath in our lungs and the food on our tables.

Our 24-7 busyness keeps us from awareness of these things – it keeps us from awareness of who we are in relationship with the One who created us.

So use these forty days as wilderness time; to simplify, seek clarity, seek freedom, and cultivate a closer relationship with God, in which we are nourished by the bread of life and living water, in which we cede authority to the Lord of heaven and earth, in which we are protected by the promise of eternal life.

But don't worry about having your own show-down with the devil – Jesus already did that for us.

Picture a barren land, the sun blazing overhead, no shade, no wind; a buzzard circles. Two men face off. One fires three shots; they all miss.

The other man never draws, just stands his ground.

"You think you're good," says the gunslinger. "But I'm just warming up. We'll meet again."

"I reckon we will," says the quiet one. "One day. High noon."

*Amen.*

### **Luke 4:1-13**

Jesus,  
full of the Holy Spirit,  
returned from the Jordan and  
was led by the Spirit  
in the wilderness,  
where for forty days  
he was tempted by the devil.

He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "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,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.