

First Sunday of Lent, Year C. February 14, 2016. Lisa Hlass

Our gospel story of Jesus tempted in the wilderness occurs after his baptism in the Jordan; remember that after he was baptized, Jesus prayed, and the holy spirit came to him and a voice from heaven saying, “You are my son. Today I have become your father.”

That magnificent moment was immediately followed by a harsh experience. Jesus was led into the wilderness, a wilderness known in Hebrew as Jeshimon or “the Devastation” — a sun-scorched expanse of limestone cliffs and wind-blown dust stretching from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea.

It was there that for 40 days, Jesus was put to the test. (pause)

The Season of Lent is 40 days long.

Its origins go back to the earliest days of the church, when potential converts underwent a fast of 40 hours to prepare for their baptisms, which would take place at the Easter Vigil.

Later in church history this became a season of 40 days — a period of prayer, fasting, and contemplation in preparation for Christ’s passion, death and resurrection.

During his 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus fasted.

He became famished and weak — an opportune time for temptation to visit. “If you are God’s son,” says the devil, “turn this stone into a loaf of bread.”

Jesus replies, “Scripture says, ‘People cannot live on bread alone.’”

This Scripture and the others that come forth as he was being tempted, came to Jesus from his study of Torah, the ancient Hebrew Scriptures, where God provides instruction and guidance to the covenant people through Moses.

They, too, were in the wilderness. (pause)

The devil then takes Jesus to Jerusalem and has him stand at the top of the Temple. The Temple was atop an enormous complex that covered nearly 35 acres and was entered through massive marble gates. The great Jewish historian Josephus, who lived a generation after Jesus, said that if you climbed to the top of the tower “you would become dizzy and couldn’t even see the end of the measureless depth before you.”

The devil says to Jesus, “To prove you are God’s son, jump down from here. And remember, it is written, ‘He will send his angels to guard you and to catch you in their hands so you won’t even hit your foot on a stone.’”

Jesus replied, “It is also written, ‘You must not put God to the test.’”

Then, taking him to a high mountain, the devil shows Jesus in an instant all the empires of the world.

One of the Greek words in this passage (*oikourmene*)

literally means “all the inhabited world”

and was commonly used to refer to the Roman Empire.

“I will give you the power and glory of these kingdoms, for it is mine, and I can give it to anyone I want.” Jesus is being tempted to choose the great earthly power of a mighty emperor.

“All you have to do is worship me,” the devil says.

Jesus responds, “It is written: ‘You must worship God and serve God alone.’”

Having exhausted all these ways of tempting Jesus, the devil finally leaves him alone, at least for the time being. (pause)

I've been thinking about the great temptations that we face in our context, in the wilderness of our day-to-day lives.

The responses of the ancient Hebrew Scriptures still apply:

"You shall not live by bread alone." "Do not put God to the test."

"Worship and serve God alone." Many of Jesus' own words

also speak to major temptations or illusions of our time.

For example, the illusion that we are all individual, separate from one another. It seems to be inherent in the American dream: If I try hard enough, I, any one of us, can accomplish anything we want, but woe to those who get in my way!

Jesus says, "I am the vine; you are the branches.

Apart from me you can do nothing."

"What you have done to the least of these, you have done to me."

"Love your neighbor as yourself" Not as much as yourself, as yourself — as an extension of own being.

Another great illusion of our time is the one constantly screaming, "Money can buy happiness. Suffering is not necessary; you can always buy the perfect "quick fix;" more is better; more and more is necessary.

Jesus says, "Don't be blinded by the pursuit of food, clothing and possessions. Stop worrying about these things.

Only those who lack spirit and soul pursue them.

You have a Father who knows what you need.

Set your heart on God and these other things will be given to you.

You cannot serve two masters. You cannot worship God and money."

And then there's the great illusion that safety and security are the most critical aspects of life. Fear becomes preeminent.

"Just make the wall higher; keep "them" out; get more guns.

Destroy your enemies. You can do it."

Jesus says, "Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you.

Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who treat you badly.

Treat people as you would have them treat you."

In case you missed it or had to make do with Ashes on the Go, let me remind you about the Ash Wednesday liturgy that ushers us into the Season of Lent. It has three main parts.

The first, the liturgy of the word, includes the reading of Scriptures that puts us in a repentant frame of mind; not just showing us the need to repent of our personal sins, but repentance of the heart that results in justice for the oppressed and mercy for the poor.

Next there is the imposition of ashes, ashes that were made by burning the palms from the previous year's Palm Sunday Liturgy. Our foreheads are marked with these ashes to remind us of the biblical symbol of repentance and of our mortality: "You are dust, and to dust you will return" (Gen 3:19).

The third part of the liturgy is the celebration of Holy Communion. As we come to receive the bread and wine throughout Lent, we are conscious of our mortality and aware that, as Alexander Solzhenitsyn once said, "the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being." And, we know that the grace of God is immensely greater than all our sin.

Whether we're preparing for baptism  
or trying to live into our baptismal covenant,  
this Lenten Season let us examine our hearts and lives,  
striving to follow Jesus,  
and always giving thanks for God's all-encompassing love.

Amen.

Sources: [christianity.com](http://christianity.com) ("Ashes to Ashes" and "The Beginning of Lent").  
Marcus Borg, Ed. *The Lost Gospel of Q* (Berkeley, CA: Ulysses Press, 1996).