
The Dark Side of Holiness

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler

Lent 1 – Year C

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. (Luke 4:1-2)

It's Lent. This is the season.

This is the season in which we Christians are led into temptation.

“Lead us not into temptation,” we pray, over and over again. Lead us not into temptation. After she prayed that prayer, the feminist, Rita Mae Brown, made the best observation. “Lead me not into temptation,” she said, “I can get there by myself.”

It's Lent. This is the season in which we are led into temptation.

As always on the First Sunday of Lent, we hear of the temptations that Jesus faced in the wilderness. He was tempted, so the story goes, to turn stones into bread. He was tempted to worship the devil so that he could gain the glory of the kingdoms of the world. He was tempted to hurl himself off the Temple pinnacle in order to test whether God would send angels to save him.

Over the years, you and I have heard fascinating explanations of this episode in the life of Jesus. According to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus engaged this set of temptations in the wilderness just before he began his public ministry. This was his initiation rite, his rite of passage, his opening retreat, his entrance examination, his test, if you will, to be mastered before he began ministry in the world.

Like you, maybe, I have been especially interested in the artistic descriptions of this event, the paintings of Jesus in the wilderness. In those various paintings, I have seen many images, such as Jesus battling a little red animal with wings and a pitchfork. I have seen Jesus painted with a dark, ominous man looking over his shoulder. I have seen Jesus talking with a black, bat-looking creature.

There were no television cameras around, two thousand years ago, to record what Jesus saw during those days in the wilderness. So, my favorite artistic description of the event is rather simple. It shows Jesus, out in the desolate wilderness, with no other physical character at all! Jesus is alone in the wilderness.

Have you seen that artistic depiction of Jesus in the wilderness? There are several. In 1898, Briton Rivière painted a striking example. There are more. Look for one. They show Jesus being tempted, but there is no other person or character or creature around!

For me, those are the paintings that get it right. Jesus was facing true temptation in the wilderness, but there was no outward representation of the devil at all. That depiction teaches me one of the most important things I have ever learned about the devil.

It is this: There is no devil in the world outside myself. There is no Satan outside of myself. The most tempting temptations

in the world, are inside me.

What causes me to go wrong in life is not what is out there in the world; it is what is inside me. This understanding goes against one of the most damaging weaknesses of our modern culture, which is our inclination to look for blame outside ourselves. When something is faulty, our culture is so quick to find the blame, to find the scapegoat, somewhere outside of ourselves.

We say, "It was our society's fault. Or it was this party's fault, that party's fault. It was our parents' fault. Or, the devil made me do it." No, the season of Lent re-directs our attention, brings us back to the stark reality of who we are. The deepest and darkest challenge to my relationship with God resides within me. The dark side of the world is not out in the world. It is in me. The most severe temptations in our lives, and the most severe demons, are those which are inside us.

And this is why we look to Jesus on this day, Jesus, who had the courage to be out in the wilderness by himself, with no one to be tempted by, except himself and what was inside him.

Now, of course, there is evil in the world. I do not mean to deny that. And I do not mean to deny that evil in the world needs our engagement. But, what I am saying is that the only way I will be able to counter that evil, to be light in the darkness, is to first face the evil and darkness in me.

Jesus knew that he would be useless in the world unless he had first faced the darkness within. Well, maybe he didn't know it exactly. But the Spirit did, the Holy Spirit. That is why the Gospel of Mark declares that the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness.

Often, we do not choose, happily and voluntarily, to enter the wilderness. We have to be driven, first. It is the Spirit who leads, and drives, and gives us the courage, to face the darkness inside ourselves before we take on the darkneses of the world. It is the Spirit who shows us the dark side of holiness.

In many cultures, there exists an adolescent rite of passage, an initiation rite, in which young people learn something about themselves and about growing up. Often that initiation rite is severe, as James Hollis describes in his book, *Under Satan's Shadow*. The experience is one of separation, death, rebirth, teachings, ordeal, and, then, finally, return. I guess it might take forty days.

Sadly, not many such rites of passage exist in our present culture. (I would be interested in how we regain those kinds of things.) But we do have Lent. We have this season where we voluntarily give up things, where we take courage to engage in self-examination and repentance, where we take courage to enter darkness.

Yes, Lent can be the season to realize that there is a dark side, a shadow side of our interior lives. Indeed, there is a dark side of holiness. If we do not know that dark side, then we do not know holiness yet. We do not know ourselves fully.

Many great psychoanalysts, following Carl Jung, seek to explore the unconscious self. Jung said, "It is a frightening thought that man also has a shadow side to him, consisting not just of little weaknesses and foibles, but of a positively demonic dynamism. The individual seldom knows anything of this... But let these harmless creatures form a mass, and there emerges a raging monster." (from *Psychology of the Unconscious*).

Good spiritual directors know that in our unconscious are all sorts of inner strange things, including horrors and darkness. "Get to know your shadow side," they say. "Get in touch with your dark side." To put it simplistically: get to know your dark side so that it doesn't jump up and surprise you. Get to know your dark side so that you don't act out on those urges subconsciously. Maybe even make friends with your dark side.

Carl Jung said that "Knowing your own darkness is the best method for dealing with the darkneses of other people." Jung would say, later, that "One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious" (from "The Philosophical Tree," *Alchemical Studies*, 1945).

I would say that, out in the wilderness, Jesus was making the darkness conscious.

Jesus did not do physical battle with a winged red demon out in the mountains. That can be a fine and useful image, a symbol of what he was going through. But his primary opponent was within himself. It was his shadow side.

The poet, Theodore Roethke, understood this. He wrote,

*In a dark time, the eye begins to see.
I meet my shadow in the deepening shade.*

Yes, Lent is the season for us to realize that there is a dark side, a shadow side of our interior lives. There is a dark side of holiness. If we do not know that dark side, then we do not know ourselves fully. And, we do not know holiness yet.

But this is the season. This is the season to be led into temptation, where Jesus himself went, showing us the way. Our journey towards holiness will take us to the dark side. But, that dark side of holiness can be the beauty of holiness. That journey is how Jesus brought light to the world, and it is how we will bring light to the world, too.

AMEN.

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