

I Lent – A
 Mt 4.1-11
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 Church of the Holy Communion
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In the Bible study I lead over at MUSC, we are working our way through the Apostles' Creed, and we had quite an interesting discussion, I thought, when we considered the Creed's first article, which begins almost exactly as does that of the Nicene Creed which we will say together in about twelve minutes – if I don't get carried away: I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

"I believe in God the Father." That is the first thing we Christians affirm about God, that the first person of the Godhead has revealed himself as, and eternally is, "Father." Now some in our Bible study admitted that this can be a problematic thing, to think of and to pray to a God who is "Father." After all, so many people have troubled, if not terribly tragic, relationships with their earthly fathers. But of course that is nothing new. St. Augustine, though his mother Monica was – quite literally – a saint, had a troubled and troubling father. Augustine was a Christian for quite some time before he could bring himself to pray to God as "Father."

Sigmund Freud saw all this "Heavenly Father" business as an obvious projection of infantile desire. Don't we all, he reasoned, want a figure in our lives who is strong and powerful and yet intimate and caring, a figure who is protector and provider, whose bondedness to us provides a solidity of relationship, who takes pleasure in our triumphs and shares our joys, and who grieves at our failings and shares our sorrows, someone who is committed to raise us up to maturity. Well of course we do, so Freud thought it not so surprising that at some point in the history of religions we should fashion for ourselves a god to fit the "father" bill.

Well, perhaps. But C.S. Lewis pointed out a more obvious conclusion. Lewis said, we hunger, we desire food – well, there is such a thing as food! We desire physical intimacy with our beloved – well, what do you know! Turns out there is such a thing as – since this is a family show – physical intimacy. So, Lewis reasoned, if all our other desires tend to correspond to some real world object, is it not reasonable to suppose that our desire for a Father, a Father who fulfills all our innate expectations for all a father should be – might not such a desire be taken as evidence that there is such a Person?ⁱ

"I believe in God the Father." That is the first Christian affirmation. When Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them to pray, he said, "When you pray, say, 'Our Father.'" St. Paul tells us that when we take up that prayer, when we pray 'Abba, Father!' it is the Holy Spirit "bearing witness with our spirit that we are the children of God."ⁱⁱ The Anglican theologian J.I. Packer, when asked the simple question, "What is a Christian?" said "the richest answer I know is that a Christian is one who has God as Father."ⁱⁱⁱ

So it's interesting, at least to me, that as on the first Sunday in Lent we come to this very famous account of the temptation of Christ during the 40 days he fasted and prayed in the Judean desert, it is exactly here, at the point of God's Fatherhood and Christ's unique Sonship, that the devil makes his attack.

So, let's look at our lesson. It begins, "Then Christ was led up by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil." Then Christ was led up. That little adverb "then" should clue us in that whatever happened immediately before is important for understanding what's about to happen; in fact, it tells that what is about to happen is a consequence of what has just happened.

So, what had just happened? Our Lord was baptized by John the Baptist in the river Jordan; we heard about that just a few weeks ago on the first Sunday after the Epiphany. And you remember the great exclamation point to that

event: the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus in the form of a dove, and the Father speaks from heaven, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased.”

This is my Son! I am your Father! This is the assurance given our Lord at the outset of his public ministry as follows his vocation as the Messiah of God. And it is precisely this assurance that the devil will try to shake in each of these three temptations in the desert. We see it explicitly in the first two:

If you are the Son of God . . . turn these stones into bread.

If you are the Son of God . . . throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the Temple.

“But the third temptation breaks that pattern,” you object. No, I reply somewhat pedantically, actually it doesn’t. He showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you.’ But Jesus and the devil were both students of Scripture, and this third temptation turns out to be an allusion to Psalm 2: “Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee. Desire of me, and I shall give thee the nations for thine inheritance, and the utmost parts of the earth for thy possession.”^{iv}

At each point, the Adversary questions Christ’s sonship, its reality and what it means – and it is the same with us, who by grace and adoption have been made in the waters of baptism what Jesus is by nature: sons and heirs of the Father’s love.^v

Today is the first Sunday in Lent, this season of renewed and intensified self-examination and repentance in preparation for Good Friday and Easter. We would do well to examine ourselves at just this point, even to take on as a Lenten discipline the practice of meditating on God’s Fatherhood. Are we absolutely settled, in the deepest places of our hearts, that God is our Father, and that to have God as Father is greater than whatever counterfeits of love and security the Devil would use to deceive us? Isn’t that always the basic temptation? That getting this thing, or perhaps more often holding on to this thing – this desire, this money, this relationship, this experience, this whatever – is better, gives me more security than the Father can provide, can make me more whole than can the Father’s love? Our failings and fallings are always in the end failures to rest in the Fatherly love of God.

The key thing is to remember that we are God’s children, his sons and daughters, by virtue of being incorporated by trusting faith into the unique sonship of Jesus Christ, and not by virtue of being such swell people. The danger is that we will come to a text such as this, to Jesus overcoming temptation in the desert, and see Jesus in it only, or even primarily, as our example – and not as the One by whose obedience we are redeemed, the One in whom God the Father adopts us as his children.

But haven't we already said that, or rather sung it, in the liturgy this morning? In the Great Litany, we pray the Lord to deliver us from all manner of bad things, from pride to plague pestilence, and then the prayer of the Church teaches us to rely on those means by which God makes us his children now and one day will make us "safely to arrive at home." Means which God our Father provides, not we. And the means of course is none other than his Son, our brother Jesus Christ. After all, this is why we Christians talk about “the Gospel” – it is “good news” about what God has done for us in Christ, not about what we have done for God; it is “good news”, not “good advice.” So in the Litany we move from naming those particular evils from which we hope to be delivered, to naming those mighty acts of God by which he has delivered us. So this morning we prayed,
By the mystery of thy holy Incarnation; by thy holy Nativity and submission to the Law; by thy Baptism, Fasting, and Temptation, Good Lord, deliver us.

By thy Baptism, Fasting, and Temptation. When Christ overcomes temptation, he is much more than our example. He is not just showing us strategies for dealing with temptation; rather, he is winning a victory for us - he is obeying on our behalf. The story of Israel – the story of all God's children, the story of you and me – is repeated and taken up into the life of Christ, only – praise God – with much different results. Whereas the children of Israel – and we in our own lives – fell for the Devil's lie, doubted God's Fatherly goodness, grumbled and rebelled in their desert

wanderings, Jesus the faithful and eternal Son of the Father will obey and overcome in his. Baptism unites us to Christ, making us sons and daughters - heirs all - of the Father's love. St. Paul utterly internalized this truth, and he saw it as the death blow - or better yet, the life blow - to our wounded and fallen human nature. So in this morning's epistle lesson he writes, For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous. The other morning at breakfast after the 8.00 Mass, Mr. Hubbard, Fr. Sanderson and I were discussing this morning's hymn at the procession out (this is the kind of scintillating conversation we enjoy), that wonderful and familiar hymn, "Come thou fount of every blessing," and we noted that it is a shame that the editors of the Hymnal 1982 felt that the second stanza was too obscure and needed revision. Our hymnals now have the second stanza beginning, "*Here I find my greatest treasure, / hither by thy help I've come.*" But the original, goes like this:

Here I raise mine Ebenezer; Hither by thy help I've come; / And I hope, by Thy good pleasure, Safely to arrive at home.

Well, "Here I raise mine Ebenezer" is, I guess, plenty obscure. Turns out it has nothing to do with Mr. Scrooge. Instead, it refers to an incident in the Old Testament in which the Lord had given the Israelites a great and miraculous victory over the Philistines. Following the battle, the prophet Samuel erected a stone monument, saying, "The Lord has helped us." "Ebenezer" is simply the Hebrew for "stone of help."^{vi}

When we feel in ourselves the daily struggle against the world, the flesh, and the devil, and especially when it that struggle we have again fallen, our hearts accuse us^{vii} and our sonship is indicted - what shall we do? Well, *here I raise mine Ebenezer*. Here is our stone of help. We have fallen, but Jesus has overcome, and our confidence is in him who was "obedient unto death, even death on the cross."^{viii} Our baptism is into him, and it is in him and through him that the Father lavishes such love upon us "that we should be called the children of God."^{ix} And it is in him and through him that we may hope "safely to arrive at our Father's home."

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i See Peter Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith*; C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. Also, Kreeft's article, "The Argument from Desire": <http://www.peterkreeft.com/topics/desire.htm>

ii Rom 8.15,16

iii J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*.

iv The connection between Ps 2.7,8 and this temptation becomes more clear in the parallel passage in Luke (3.21,22; 4.5-7); there is a significant textual tradition in which the Father's words at the baptism of Jesus are "Thou art my beloved son, this day have I begotten thee," making the parallel precise. This reading is included as a footnote in most English versions.

v It is important to remember that in the ancient near east, and in Greco-Roman culture generally, only male children were adopted, normally to provide an heir for a son-less family - only sons could inherit. This is why St. Paul, just after declaring that in Christ there is "neither male nor female" (Gal 3.28), declares that now, in Christ, we are "all sons" - and if sons, then heirs (4.4-7). Paul is not a misogynist, but is showing that in redemption and its benefits, men and women are equal.

vi 1 Sam 7.3-13

vii 1 Jn 3.19,20

viii Phil 2.8

ix 1 Jn 3.1