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Lent 1, Matthew 4:1-11

Man In the Mirror

During World War II, when the most urgent matters of the war needed attention, Prime Minister Winston Churchill would sometimes visit The United States, to address Congress, and meet with President Franklin Roosevelt in the White House. Churchill had the odd habit of practicing his speeches in front of a mirror, in the nude. One evening Roosevelt wheeled around the corner in the White House guest suite and there's Churchill in front of a mirror, completely naked, practicing his speech. Roosevelt caught his breath and said, "my apologies Mr. Prime Minister, I did not mean to interrupt." Churchill turned on his heels to face Roosevelt, waved his hand, and replied, "On the contrary, the Prime Minister of England has nothing to hide from the President of the United States."

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, the season of the cross. A six-week spiritual journey into the wasteland of our souls, a time of cleansing and preparation before the feast of Easter. Lent is the season in which we strip away the exteriors of our lives. We give up that which we have to hide and take a long close look at ourselves in the mirror, at who we really are. Lent is the time in which the church commands us to talk about sin. It's as if the church says to us, before we can attain our Easter joy, we must first come face to face with our fallen humanity, our sinfulness, with who and what we are. According to Reinhold Niebuhr, sin is the most self-evident of Christian doctrines. But a language that is foreign to most of us sophisticated, highly evolved, modern people. Sin has been badly translated over the years. Usually when the word comes up, our cheeks flush, our minds drift to the last time we had an extra piece of cheesecake, or a temptation of the flesh, gambling, drugs, or some other moral lapse. But throughout the ages the church has claimed sin as something much more than a break in the moral code or a momentary crack in otherwise disciplined behavior. Rather, sin is something in which we are caught, enmeshed, stuck, a state of being if you will. We look around and see that the world is broken, it is not the way it should be, but sin is also inside of us. You may have heard me say before, when President Bush announced just before the Iraq war that he would rid the world of evil, one theologian replied: "how does he intend to rid the world of evil. I can't even rid my own heart of evil." Like little insects caught in the sticky bonds of a spider web, sin is outside of us and inside of us, and we are all wrapped up in it.

In Matthew's account for today, Jesus is still wet from the waters of his baptism in the Jordan when he is led by the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. The lectionary serves up the same story each year on the first Sunday of Lent, recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the story of Jesus' fasting and temptation in the desert.

Jesus has the total package. He is young, bright, and gifted. In rummaging around in a few ancient texts this week, I discovered that Jesus had been valedictorian at Nazareth High School, captain of the soccer team, and was voted by his peers most likely to succeed. He is gifted. And as all Duke students know, and as Jesus finds out soon

enough, opportunities, dare I say, temptations, abound for those who are gifted. Jesus is led out into the wilderness to fast by himself for 40 days and 40 nights, bible speak, for a longer time than any one of us would want to be alone in the desert with no food. Jesus was made of sterner stuff than me, for as long as those hot days must have been, the chilly lonely nights would surely have been even longer. Most of us know the story by now. The devil appears to Jesus, who is now vulnerable, hungry, tired, and alone, and tempts him three times. It is a job offer that would be difficult for any shining young start to turn down: Power, success, influence. Jesus is tempted, put to the test, his identity and vocation are up for grabs. Would he be the one God called him to be? Would he put his gifts to their proper use? Or would he be swayed to be someone he was not, giving his gifts for selfish ends and worldly ambition?

At its root, sin is our desire to be something more than what we are, our desire to put ourselves in the place of God. I have a friend who says he discovered a long lost translation of Psalm 46, you know, the famous Psalm that says: "Be still and know that I am God." My friend says in his translation the Psalmist writes, "Be still and know that I am God . . . and you are not." When Adam and Eve ate of the tree of good and evil in the garden, it wasn't just that they broke some silly frivolous legality; it was that their lives got out of synch with God's life, they saw themselves, rather than God, at the center of things. They fell for the fairytale that all of us hear over and over today, that we are self-reliant, self-constructed, self-made, and above all, self-sufficient.

Sin attacks Jesus when he was at his hungriest, his loneliest, his most vulnerable. Jesus was tempted to misuse his God-given gifts, to become something that he was not. And this, I suggest, is the most damaging effect of sin, the temptation to become someone who we are not. The temptation to use our God-given gifts for our own desires, rather than God's desires. And as Jesus discovered the temptations are the strongest precisely in those places where we are the most gifted, in the times when we are the most vulnerable.

For the majority of us, sin tends to be more nuanced than Michael Jackson's struggles just now, or at least starts out that way. Most of us here are generally bright and sophisticated, complex thinkers. If the devil popped up wearing a red-suit with a pointy-tale carrying a pitchfork, we'd head for the exits, run for the hills. But sin tends to be much more subtle in our lives. I remember the student who asked me one day, "do you believe in the devil?" To which I said, "absolutely." She seemed somewhat surprised by this. And so she said, "oh yeah, what does the devil tell you?" And I quoted George McDonald: "the devil tells me exactly what I most want to hear, that I belong to myself."

You may have heard the story about the Episcopal Priest who went to the Harley Davidson dealer to buy a motorcycle. The salesman came out to the parking lot, noticed the man admiring the bike, and said: "that there bike is the most powerful piece of machinery you'll ever be seen on. It goes from zero to 60 in 5.8 seconds. Jet black fuel tank, chrome muffler, raised handle-bars. Can't you see yourself, flying down the road, hair on fire, every woman's head turning as you go by?" "What sort of work do you do?" the salesman asked. "I'm an Episcopal Priest." "Ah, this here motorcycle is the safest, most practical bike we've got on the lot. It comes with two helmets and free riding instructions."

How does temptation work in our lives? It tells us exactly what we want to hear. What's more than that, as Jesus found out, sin is slippery. Our greatest temptations come

in the places where we are most gifted. The temptation is to use those gifts to satisfy our own desires, rather than God's desires. To be someone other than the person God created us to be.

With the death of playwright Arthur Miller this past week, I've been reflecting some on Miller's most famous character, Willy Lowman, in the modern play, *Death of a Salesman*. If you remember the story, it's about an American family in the post War II boom. The father, Willy Lowman, is a traveling salesman who is given a prestigious route through the posh New England countryside. At the end of the story, of course, Lowman loses his job, and what he believes to be the respect of his community, especially his family. He takes his own life in the hopes that his family can cash in on the insurance policy. It's clear throughout the play that Lowman doesn't know who he is. He falls prey to the temptations in life, the lure of success, money, power and image, that his sharp mind and slick tongue are capable of producing.

At one point early in the play he turns to his two young sons, Biff and Happy, and says: "Boys, they know me up and down in New England. The finest people. And when I bring you boys up there, the doors will be open for all of us. 'Cause one thing's for sure, boys, I have friends in high places. I can park my car in any street in New England and the cops protect it as if it were their own." But at his funeral, only his immediate family and best friend show up. And his son Biff, now grown, says knowingly, "that man didn't know who he was."

Jesus' temptations have everything to do with his identity. Would he stay true to the person God had created him to be, called him to be, gifted him to be? The one who would guide us, his disciples, down a different road than the one paved with money, success, and power? Or would he be tempted, like Adam and Eve, to become someone else, someone he was not?

Perhaps the most touching moment in the movie *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, takes place in the attic of Hogwarts, the training school for gifted young wizards. If you know the story – if you don't know the story, by the way, just ask the nearest ten year old, and you'll get a full report – Harry Potter is the most gifted young wizard in the school. He's also an orphan who has had a painful and lonely childhood following his parents' deaths. In the dusty recesses of Hogwarts, Harry discovers the mirror named "Desire." It is a magic mirror, that reflects back to the one standing before it the deepest desires of the heart. When Harry stands before the mirror he sees his reflection and standing behind him on his right and left are his mother and father, with him, the deepest desire of his heart. He feels a touch on his right shoulder and he looks, but there is nothing. He feels a touch on his left shoulder, and he turns, but there is nothing there either. They are gone. The wise wizard Dumbledore stumbles into the room at that moment and sees Harry staring into the mirror and says: "only when one looks into this mirror and sees oneself as one actually is, can he or she be accounted truly happy."

And friends this is the gift of Lent. It is a mirror of honesty and compassion, a 40-day mirror in which we can see ourselves for who we really are, a mirror that won't tell us what we want to hear, but what we need to know. We are not self-made; we are God-made. We have not been crafted in the wilderness image of the American dream, or Duke University, but made in the image of the sacred. Look closely into the mirror of Lent these next 40 days. Strip away the external trappings, and see the image of God's beloved child, broken and yet beautiful, trapped in sin yet overwhelmed by grace, frail,

vulnerable, hungry and lonely. And in the background of this 40-day Lenten journey of gut-level honesty, beckons the greatest desire of our hearts, an Easter of unending joy, we may attain at last. Amen.