

Rev. Benjamin Broadbent
1st Sunday in Lent - February 21, 2010

I.

Today we continue the journey we began last Wednesday, the journey Christians make each year through the season of Lent. It is a season of preparation, a season of introspection, a season of anticipation. For some, it is a season of letting go and giving something up. For others, it is a time to take on something new. In either case, Lent is an opportunity to initiate new patterns of practice with the hope of inculcating new habits of living.

Lent is a time to prepare for transformation. Our destination is, after all, Easter, but there is no Easter without walking the long, often difficult road of Lent, a road that invariably passes by Golgotha. During Holy Week, the foot of the cross will be within our reach. Betrayal and abandonment and loss will be close enough to taste. Our only hope will be, that after waiting 50 days from Transfiguration, then 47 days from Ash Wednesday, then 7 days from Palm Sunday, 3 days from Maundy Thursday, 2 days from Good Friday, and through the long darkness of Holy Saturday, our only hope will be that the tomb is empty.

But that hope is a long way off, beyond the line of the horizon, behind many corners around which we cannot yet see. So, for now, we dwell in the present moment and do the work that is fitting for such a season as this. And we are in good company, for we journey with the mortal souls gathered in this sanctuary today, and with many who gather in other sanctuaries throughout the world. Yes, we are in good company, for many of our ancestors in the faith have walked this road before and have seen fit to record their stories and experiences.

Noah and his companions floated for 40 days and 40 nights, awaiting the sign of a new creation. Moses and Miriam and the people Israel walked through water and into the wilderness where they waited 40 years for God to deliver them into the promised land. Jesus himself, following his baptism and filled with the God's Holy Spirit, went into the desert, where he was tempted by none other than the devil for 40 days.

Since Jesus, other journeyers who have sought to guide us on the way. Some of those guides have been known as "the mystics." It is from some of the early Christian mystics that we will learn during our Lenten journey this year.

Before I continue, it may be helpful to take a moment to consider what is meant by the word "mysticism." Our guide in this regard is Dr. Bernard McGinn, our 2010 James W. White lecturer. Dr. McGinn is widely regarded as "the world's greatest interpreter of Western Mysticism." That's no small acknowledgment.

In his book called *Early Christian Mystics: The Divine Vision of the Spiritual Masters*, McGinn writes:

"The mystical element in Christianity... is that part of belief and practice that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what the mystics understood as a direct, immediate, and transformative encounter with the presence of God."

I'd like to unpack this sentence in an attempt to further understand what McGinn means by "mysticism." When McGinn invokes "the mystical element in Christianity," he is saying two things: First, that "mysticism is an element in the Christian religion, not a religion within a religion," nor an unrelated offshoot of Christianity. Second, that there are elements of Christianity that are not

considered “mystical” but that are still authentically part of the tradition. In other words, it’s not as if mysticism is the *true* element of Christianity while all others are false.

Further, McGinn describes mysticism as *preparation*. That is, mysticism is about practicing a way of life that prepares one for an encounter with God. In other words, a mystical experience is not, generally speaking, something that happens to someone out of the blue. It happens as a result of preparation.

McGinn also speaks of mysticism as the *consciousness* of an encounter with God. In fact, McGinn prefers the word consciousness to experience, the word I just used. He prefers consciousness because the goal of the mystics was not to bring about isolated experiences, but to deepen consciousness of God’s presence and to nurture new ways of knowing and loving.

For this reason, McGinn also describes mysticism as a *response* to a direct, immediate, and transformative encounter with the presence of God. The life of the mystic is *transformed* by her or his encounter. Not isolated experiences, like a drug trip that gives a hangover, but a deepening of consciousness that transforms the patterns of being in a person’s life.

While the mystics have often described their goal as a mystical *union* with God, McGinn prefers to describe an encounter with the *presence* of God. Many mystics avoided language about union and “have spoken of their special contact with God [in various ways], such as contemplation, vision, ecstasy, deification, birthing, endless desire and pursuit.”

II.

Now with a bit of background into the meaning of the words mystic, mystical, and mysticism, let us meet the first of the Early Christian Mystics from whom we will learn during our Lenten journey. In the year 202, Origen of Alexandria was 17 years old. His mom hid his clothes so he couldn’t leave the house. He was desperate to follow his father into martyrdom at the hands of the Roman Empire. His mom’s plan worked and he grew up to be a teacher, catechist, preacher, student of scripture, and philosopher. Alas, he would sire her no grandchildren, for he famously castrated himself. According to Dr. McGinn, “this action... seems to have been the result of an overly zealous young man taking Matthew 19:12 literally.” I’ll say. That verse reads: “There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom.” Ouch. Literalism can hurt!

It would be impossible in the course of a sermon to outline the influence of Origen’s thought upon the history of the church and western civilization. Suffice it to say that Bernie McGinn, citing theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, claims that “no figure is more invisibly all-present in the history of Christianity than Origen.”

McGinn also calls Origen “the greatest exegete of the early church.” For those who don’t know the word, an *exegete* is an interpreter of texts, usually scripture. Origen articulated a method for reading scripture in an *anagogic*, or uplifting, way. That is, scripture may be read not only for information, and not only for moral instruction. Origen described the final goal of reading scripture in these ways: “to lift the soul above,” and “to realize the Bible’s teachings through our own ascension to God,” and “to allow the soul to ascen[d] back to its source in God.”

The method Origen described was grounded in a “threefold way” of reading scripture. The first way that one may grasp the meaning of scripture is “grammatically.” That is, we may read a passage of scripture and try to understand its surface meaning, like “Who is involved?” and “What is happening?” Today, we would call this the *literal* meaning of a passage. Origen would not take sides on whether a literal reading of scripture was right or wrong, but he would claim that it is not complete. There are more, deeper ways to understand the meaning of scripture.

The second way to understand the meaning of scripture is to grasp its “moral meaning.” The moral meaning answers the question, “How, then, shall we live?” To read scripture in this way begs that we respond with the way we live our lives, including the way we treat others.

The third, and final way to read scripture seeks its mystical, or spiritual, meaning. In Origen’s words, this kind of reading is (quote) “that by which we go beyond things seen and contemplate something of things divine and heavenly, beholding them with the mind alone, for they are beyond the range of bodily sight.” If this sounds difficult to understand, that’s because it is. And it’s difficult to understand because it’s difficult for someone, even Origen, to describe. And it’s difficult to describe because what Origen is talking about is a direct encounter of God through the contemplation of scripture.

It’s difficult enough to convey the full meaning in the direct encounter of eating an orange, something we can see and smell and touch and taste. It is, therefore, exponentially more difficult to describe with mere words, a direct encounter with what Origen calls “things divine and heavenly.” According to Dr. Bernard McGinn, Origen is able to discern the mystical, or spiritual, meaning of the scriptures “through a variety of allegorical and typological tools applied to the text.” To learn the tools, you’ve got to read Origen’s work. For now, I’d like to experiment with Origen’s threefold way of understanding the meaning of scripture, applying his method to our scriptural text today.

III.

I hate to rush through my exegesis of the story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness as portrayed in Luke’s gospel. Rushing the work exegesis is something Origen would never do, but in the interest of time, let me offer this all too simple and incomplete reading of today’s scriptural text.

Reading the text, a la Origen, we first pay attention to the “grammatical sense of the words” and we “discover[] the historical reality of the passage.” Jesus has just been baptized in the Jordan river where a heavenly voice spoke to him: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Identified by Luke as “the Beloved,” the evangelist then places Jesus at the end of a genealogy stretching back to Adam, whom Luke calls “son of God.”

Now, Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. For 40 days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during that time and, we are told, as we would suspect, that he was famished. The devil, sometimes called the Tempter, subjects Jesus to a battery of tests. Hunger, power, safety - the Tempter attempts to take advantage of the vulnerabilities to which all humans are subject. The devil even resorts to quoting scripture, Psalm 91, verse 11. Apparently, even the devil knows his Bible. Jesus prevails. The devil departs in order to scheme his next attack. Jesus, now purified and ready, returns to Galilee to begin his ministry.

A literal reading takes account of the facts as presented and affirms the basic historicity of those facts. This is difficult to do in our age of historical critical skepticism. However, Origen would claim that, to move to the next level of reading, we must accept the basic truth of scripture. By no means would he say this means leaving your brain at the door. To accept the basic truth of scripture is to ask the question, “What would it mean if this text were true?” For example, note the affect this word or that passage, this image or that character, has on your rational mind. Origen acknowledges that not every passage of scripture is intended to be taken as historically true, but he would assert that even the grammatical meaning of a passage carries a deeper message for those who trust.

Let me now attempt the second, or moral reading, of the text, drawing upon what Origen calls “the advantages of temptation.” Origen writes:

The use of temptation is as follows. What our soul has received is unknown to all save God - is unknown even to ourselves; but it is manifested by means of temptations: so that it may be no longer unknown what kind of persons we are, but rather that we should also know ourselves and be aware, if we will, of our faults and give thanks.

In other words, temptation may be used as a means by which we can become aware of who we are. Instead of denying our temptations as extrinsic to who we are, we can look with honesty at what tempts us and become more self-aware. For example, I am someone who loves sweets. I will always say yes to someone who offers me cake. I will eat cake and cookies and ice cream until I feel sick in my stomach. I am someone who longs to eat sweet things.

According to Origen, this self-honesty is a spiritual practice and he goes so far as to say that “the whole life of [humanity] is... temptation.” That is, every moment of life involves some offer to our desires, and every moment is an opportunity to increase self-awareness. The challenge, says Origen, is to discipline ourselves so that we do not merely yield to every temptation. Have you ever wondered why we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “lead us not into temptation”? According to Origen, to be human is to be tempted, but we pray for the strength not *to give into* temptation.

In today’s passage, Jesus is presented as the one who avails himself of the devil’s temptations, but does not give in to them. Therefore, a moral reading of the text would suggest that we model our resistance of temptation after the example of Jesus. It’s an extreme message. He was presented with things that are, for all intents and purposes good things: Food for a famished belly, power to do good in the world, trust that things will be okay. Who wouldn’t say “yes” to these things? What if they were offered by the devil? A moral reading asserts that living by the words that God utters is better than merely filling the belly. A moral reading asserts that worshiping and serving God is the highest good, even if the devil offers you a middle management position with a decent benefits package in his corporation. A moral reading asserts that God is not a chump to be tested, like a magician or a genie, but the creator, sustainer, and redeemer of the universe, whose will and purpose are always beyond our petty schemes.

Finally, I’m not sure I should attempt to provide the third, mystical or spiritual reading of Jesus’ temptation. Instead of an explanation, let me try to describe my consciousness of God’s presence as I read these verses: I’m standing here in this pulpit, aware of the power and possibility contained in these verses, aware of my own weakness in the face of temptation, aware that were I put to the test, I would most surely fail. I am imagining Jesus in me reading these verses, reminding me, that on my own, I cannot resist eating, eating, eating. On my own, I cannot resist wanting to be in control so I can put everything in order according to my own preferences. On my own, I cannot resist making an idol of my own safety and well-being, eschewing any change in my life that would compromise my privileged security.

All this on my own.

But I am not on my own. Jesus is here, in me, reminding me that God is the one and the only one who is all in all in all in all in all... With him in me and me in him, I can see that God in Godself is more good than the greatest thing I can imagine. There is no earthly goal higher than the goal of knowing and being known by God, my creator, the lover of my soul, and my life everlasting.

IV.

For Origen, the purpose of this attempt at an anagogic, or uplifting, reading of scripture is to move *away* from alienation from God *toward* friendship with God, to move *away* from God as stranger, judge, despot, and crony *toward* God as the one who passionately desires the most intimate of relationships with such unworthy ones as we. Unworthy because we are so small, so broken, so vulnerable, so prone to falling. And God desires to call *us* friends! Invoking words from the Song of Songs,

Origen writes that God, the Savior, “speaks [through scripture] to those who have been caught in the nets of temptation [that is, life itself], saying to them as to His bride: Arise, come, my neighbor, my beautiful one, my dove.”

Can you imagine a God who speaks to you like that? Origen of Alexandria could. Amen.