

1 Lent A March 1, 2020
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First Exam
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

One of the things I love about the Episcopal Church is our litanies. We have quite a few. The word *litany* means list, and a litany is a list of prayers; prayers on behalf of others, prayers on our own behalf, prayers asking for something, prayers giving thanks to God. We started our service this morning with the Great Litany, one of the oldest lists of prayers in our tradition. On Ash Wednesday we prayed the Litany of Penitence, a list of prayers confessing our sins and asking God for the strength and resolve to change our ways. We even have a litany of Thanksgiving. These litanies are so important there are specific days in the Church year reserved for their use, such as praying the Great Litany at the start of today's service, the first Sunday in the season of Lent.

There is another litany for which I have a nostalgic affection. You won't find this litany in our Book of Common Prayer or in any of the supplemental worship resources the church offers. This litany can only be found at my seminary, Nashotah House Episcopal Seminary. It too is important and there is only one day a year it is prayed: the day of the first exam of the year for first year students. We call it, as you might guess, the Litany of the First Exam.

The Litany of the First Exam is a community event. All second and third year students (seminary is a three year program) dress up in costumes that are meant to be funny and ring bells, bang clappers, swing thuribles billowing with incense, and process into and around the classroom chanting prayers that are both heartfelt and silly while the first year students sit at the ready to take not only their first exam of the class and the academic year, but also their first exam as a seminarian. It's a pivotal moment for them. The honeymoon is over. Gone are the fun and exciting first days of class and chapel and work crew. It's time to take a test, it's a time when the seminary experience becomes a bit more real and seminarians deal with the harder aspects of leaving behind jobs, careers, towns, and lives that they loved in order to follow God's call to ordained ministry. It's a heavy moment and can be especially stressful moment in their lives.

And that's where the community comes in with humor and prayer to help them. The upper classmen's presence serves as a reminder to the first-year students that they will get through the exam, and next year will be part of the group offering a breath of humor and prayer to the newest members of their seminary community. The Litany of the First Exam, as silly as it might look, is intended not only to help students relax so they might perform better on their exam; it is also intended to be a show of welcome and inclusion into the seminary community. It is a way for the

upperclassmen to show the first year students they remember what it was like to be in those first year seats, and they are giving a hint about how to not only survive but thrive three years at seminary: keep your sense of humor, don't fall into the temptation to take it all so seriously you lose your humanity and your relationship with God. The Litany of the First Exam is a reminder the purpose of seminary isn't passing tests, it's about formation into a priest in the church.

While Jesus didn't have a Litany of the First Exam in today's Gospel, he did have the beautiful and powerful experience of his baptism before he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted. That is an important detail to pay attention to. After Jesus' Baptism, after Jesus emerged from the water of the River Jordan, after the heavens opened up, after the spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove, after the Voice of God declared, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased," after this tremendous moment, we saw in today's Gospel Jesus didn't have a party to celebrate, he didn't go out and round up disciples, he didn't write a press release announcing his ministry tour. Instead, he followed the same Spirit that had descended upon him into the wilderness for the sole purpose of being tempted. Another way to interpret that word is tested. In other words, Jesus was led into a desolate place, a place without comfort, in order to be tested.

Instead of a well-loved professor to issue the test, Jesus' was tested by the devil. This is another detail to pay attention to. We tend to imagine the devil as the embodiment of evil, a force decidedly and actively fighting against God and all God's goodness in an epic battle of good versus evil with our fragile souls in the middle. But that's not what Matthew's Gospel described. Instead the author of Matthew described something akin to the Old Testament book of Job, where Satan was one of God's angels whose purpose was to test or tempt the people of earth to stray from God's ways and then report to God how obedient and good humanity was or wasn't. While we might struggle with God giving an angel this kind of work, that is what the devil did in today's Gospel. He did what the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness for: tempting and testing.

Which means we might want to reconsider our evaluation and judgment of temptation and testing. I've often heard people say and have had times when I have felt that tempting or testing was a punishment by God. Something cruel and small minded. Like how many people criticize the story of Creation we heard in our first reading this morning about God intentionally telling the first man he can't eat from a specific tree in the Garden, even though God had given him many more trees brimming with fruit he could eat. Lots of folks think this was devious of God, or naive of God. How could God not know humanity well enough to know we humans can't resist temptation? How could God not know you can give us millions of trees to eat from but we're going to go after the one you tell us not to eat from? That's just how we are.

Such a judgment, I believe, misses the point of the story. God had just made humans; they were brand new and didn't know themselves yet. They were the naive ones, and God had given them free will, and perhaps God just wanted to see what they would do when faced with temptation. Likewise, the snake was not necessarily the devil, we Westerners read that interpretation into the story, but the concept of the devil as we know it hadn't evolved yet when the Creation story was written. The snake was clever and took advantage of humanity's newness. Sadly, some folks use the story of temptation to blame women for sin. But let's pay attention to details: the man wasn't off snoozing or working hard somewhere else, the story says he was there with the woman at the time. That means he was silent all during her conversation with the serpent, he didn't interfere, he didn't resist temptation. It seemed both the man and the woman desired something, perhaps the ability to be more powerful than they were, weren't willing to do the work of growing and maturing, and the fruit appeared to be an easy way to get what they wanted.

While we often interpret this story as they failed the test by giving in to temptation, we could also say they began learning more about themselves, and the complexity of humanity: how there is goodness in our curiosity, our refusal to blindly accept the status quo, but there are also consequences to our actions and choices. And we can say no, if we choose to. So perhaps one of the morals of the story is humanity needs to learn how to choose, especially which voice we are going to listen to. Choosing to listen to the snake meant moving away from God; but the story was far from over and God would still give humanity many more opportunities to trust God and follow God in the future.

Perhaps that test in the Garden was the just the first of many for humanity. Perhaps being human means learning how to deal with testing and temptation, which is one way we practice our free will, learn about ourselves, and grow and mature. Jesus' being led by the Spirit into the wilderness for testing is another way the author of Matthew's Gospel is showing us the Son of God chose to be part of humanity, to be human, by being tempted. This, by the way, is not the only time Jesus is tested in the Gospels. We'll hear it again; most often Jesus will be tested by the religious authorities, the pharisees and scribes, sometimes by the crowds or his disciples. But this time in the wilderness is his first exam as the Son of God, not unlike that first exam in seminary, and it seems the purpose of this exam is for Jesus to discern how God sees the Messiah's purpose, mission, and direction.

The devil's temptation of Jesus is not so different from that of humanity in the garden: to save the world on his own terms instead of God's. To be his own man instead of God's Son. To solve all the world's problems like food insecurity, to show off God's power by making God's angels rush to protect him, and by becoming the new Rome, the new ruler who could make anyone do what he wanted simply by worshiping

something other than God. Jesus dismissed the temptations to be his own man and chose each time to be God's Son, and in so doing chose the way of the cross and the way of love, God's love for the world, and for the people of the world. Maybe this test was as important for Jesus as it is for us in learning to discern Jesus' way of love from all the other ways we might traverse.

As followers of Jesus, we are no strangers to testing and temptation. Instead of thinking of testing or temptation as a form of punishment, maybe we could think of it as part of how we grow, and how we could grow closer to God and each other. Being tempted is part of being human, which means the church itself is not immune to testing and temptation either. I'm sure any of us can think of examples of when the church chose to strive for its own power and popularity instead of trusting Christ to lead us along the way of love. Those temptations will always be there, and when we choose poorly, we can recognize our wrongdoing and confess, and resolve to change and then make the changes. I hope we all can also think of times when the Church followed the way of love, when we welcomed the different, the outcast, the suffering. When we offer not just food for empty bellies but places of rest from a weary world. When we offer forgiveness instead of revenge. Even pausing for this season of Lent to reflect on how we are following Christ, to confess our failures, and to make intentional changes to better follow Jesus are examples that can help the world recognize there is another way to live than grasping for power, privilege, wealth, and dominance; there is God's way of love that makes room for all, that listens for and follows God's voice even into uncomfortable places where there may be testing, but there is also God's love which can be the source of a refreshment delivered by angels; and can sometimes look like some welcoming humor before an exam.