

1st Sunday of Lent, Cycle C: 21 Feb., 2010

As you will recall, all four (4) of the Gospels are different from one another and I'm confident that you will remember that John's is by far the most unique. The other three (3) are similar in a number of ways and are given the name, the synoptic Gospels, which means the "same eye", in that they are similar in structure and content. And I'm sure that you will also recall that particular bible stories will appear in almost identical wording in one (1) or two (2) of the synoptic Gospels. But today, we are fortunate enough to have one of those stories that appear in each of the synoptic Gospels (i.e. those of Matthew, Mark and Luke). Now when this happens, I usually find a nugget of spiritual truth in the difference rather than in the similarity of the three (3).

Specifically, I'd like to focus on how each account begins with the description of how Jesus came to be in the desert. Mark writes: "The Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert." While Matthew and Luke's account indicate that Jesus was "led by the Spirit into the desert." You of course can see the similarity between the phrases; however, Luke adds one more critical phrase that is not found in either of the other two (2) synoptics. Luke starts his history of Jesus' temptations in the desert with the words: "filled with the Holy Spirit".

It's interesting that Luke is the only one (1) of the three (3) gospel writers who felt it necessary to add the words: "filled with the Holy Spirit". Now certainly we can wonder why he did such a thing, but we can never know with certainty why he did so. But, since it appears as an addition and isn't in the other synoptic it makes me suspect that it is significant. And I'd like to take some time exploring that today.

Now in all three (3) of the synoptic Gospels, the first thing that Jesus "does" after his baptism is travel into the desert. And in each account of his baptism the Gospel writers describe how the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus at that most sacred moment. Now it appears that Luke added his phrasing so as to remove any ambiguity about the action of the Spirit. It just wasn't as an external guide but rather it was an internal force that was alive and at working inside Jesus as an indispensable component of who he was.

This is significant in the way that the rest of the story plays out as Jesus is tempted three (3) times by the devil. Now it's not too far of a stretch to infer that Jesus was able to deal with these temptations because of God's Spirit dwelling and working in him. But, this indwelling of the Holy Spirit has profound implications not only for Jesus but for you and for me.

Now as Jesus begins his journey into the desert, we too join him in this the first full week of Lent as you can tell by the change in the liturgical colors and a more reflective music tone and the absence of the "alleluia".

For the next six (6) weeks, we will have time to examine our spiritual lives and evaluate our relationship with God. We will explore our sinfulness and take the opportunity hopefully to participate in our parish Lenten Penance Service. Check your bulletin. We'll be sure to remind you, because I don't want you to pass-up the opportunity to repent or to simply let the opportunity pass you by.

But if we truly want to repent and reform our lives, and live a more faithful and authentic life as God created us to do, we would be wise to spend more time reflecting on something very different than our sinfulness. You see, whether we fully understand it or not or fully believe it or not, the Spirit that was with Jesus in the desert, the Spirit that strengthened him against temptation, the Spirit that dwelt in him is precisely the same Spirit that dwells in each of us. It's the same Spirit that we received in baptism and whose gifts we were sealed with in confirmation. The desert may be a lonely place, but we need not journey there alone. God has promised to be with us and in us.

As we learned from Scripture today, the power of God will overcome the power of temptation and that's a power that we can tap into, provided that we give the Spirit the opportunity to make its presence known in our actions, words and deeds as we live our daily lives. Now don't be fooled into a false sense of security by leading a minimalistic Christian. You know as well as I do that temptation abounds in the world. But, where will we find the evidence of God's presence in our lives? It will be demonstrated in our words, our actions and our deeds as if we were "filled with the Holy Spirit".