

Sermon: Year C, 1 Lent
Texts: Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Romans 10:5-13
Luke 4:1-13

Lent is an appropriate time to make confessions, but if this is problematic for you, I thought I'd seed the pot by making one of my own. I've never been to Mecca, and, to be honest, I have no intentions to go there. There are a lot of places to visit in the world, and, for no reason in particular, Mecca will probably never crack my top ten list. This might be different if I were Muslim. If that were so, it might be a prime destination. Put even more strongly, it might be the goal of a lifetime's pilgrimage, to reach a holy site located at the center of one's faith.

While I'm at it, I've never been to Jerusalem either, the most famous and certainly the most contentious holy city in the world. The sacred claim of Judaism and hallowed by Muslims and Christians alike, its crowded streets are both the cause of fierce, unending conflict and the material promise of enduring blessing and peace. People from around the world are drawn to its sublime intensity. Its narrow alleys are so evocative of ancient events and illustrative of divine texts, just as they are provocative, still in our present time, of dreadful violence done in God's name. I could imagine traveling there sometime – hopefully when peace is the result of prayers and not the truce drawn by guns and walls and soldiers.

But I'm an American, and thus, according to Mark Taylor, a noted New England theologian, the real destination spot for me and the great goal of religious pilgrimage, is Las Vegas. Americans live in the New World, the famed melting pot where all the unwanted baggage from time past can be summarily doffed, and we can start afresh. Ancient customs, class distinctions, tribal identities: they all pass under Lady Liberty's flame, and we are no longer bound by them. Holiness does not come by rabidly attaching ourselves to old places and names, insisting, even at the price of murder and martyrdom, that they belong to one group and not another. Holiness arises, says Taylor, by letting go of everything, and the place where this can be done, most extravagantly, lies in the middle of the Nevada desert.

Taylor is deeply serious in this claim, and Las Vegas and millions of Americans seem more than happy to play along. The city's ad council proudly boasts that "what is done in Las Vegas, stays in Las Vegas," and the direct implication is if you visit, you can do anything you want. Nothing follows you back out. Nothing attaches itself unless you want it to be so.

You can go to Las Vegas and suddenly find yourself in an glittering Egyptian pyramid. You can visit an enormous theme park that recreates almost all of Biblical Palestine, free of suicide bombers, free of Arabs or Jews. You can arrive with a few dollars in your pocket and leave with thousands. You can rent a tux and be a celebrity waltzing among the glamorous. You can be married on the spur of the moment by Elvis (sort of), and you can acquire a divorce just as quickly.

If you believe the message, you can be anyone you want to be, freed from the sad restrictions of your own identity. Forget that you have a spouse. Forget that you make minimum wage at a Denny's restaurant in Paramus, New Jersey. Forget that, most days, you get up at 5:00 AM to feed slop to several hundred hogs in Nebraska. Your life, in Las Vegas, is entirely yours – yours alone, precisely because, from the gargantuan Sphinx on the strip to whatever happens in back street motels, nothing that you see or do is really real. It's all replication, imitation, or sheer imagination at play, and nothing more.

The traditional understanding of miracles is that they occur when something real arises from out of nowhere by divine power. Miracles of this sort, however, raise a lot of suspicion.

But in Las Vegas, the miraculous happens differently. It isn't that something real comes from out of nothing; it's the experience, at least for a time, that nothing at all is real. In a very odd twist of Scriptural verse, Taylor suggests that this is what Jesus' meant by his claim that those who lose their lives will save them. Get out of Tuscaloosa. Go to Las Vegas. Do something, be someone fantastic. Like nowhere else, you are free to be anyone or anything you choose, without consequence. And this, Taylor claims, without any hint of irony, makes Las Vegas the very Kingdom of God on earth, the new holy city.

Oddly, I have no desire to go there. In spite of all the promises, it still seems to me more desert than heaven, more like a wilderness than a kingdom worthy of God.

In the reading from this morning's Gospel, we heard the familiar story of Jesus' temptation after his baptism. It's easy to pass quickly through the initial verses of this text to the point where the detailed contest begins. But if we do so we miss something very important. For Luke tells us first that Jesus went into the wilderness where, for forty days, he was tempted by the devil. He tells us nothing more about this. We aren't given an explicit picture of what he meant by wilderness or, for that matter, what perception he had of the devil – and neither term is particularly clear for us. Two thousand years later, we tend to enjoy the wilderness. We pack up all sorts of hi-tech gear and make the wilderness an adventure. And the devil has long ceased to be an actual, ominous presence. We might say we are bedeviled by our own fears and desires or refer, comically, to an imagined beast with horns, but the vision of an actual confrontation between an evil being and us seems terribly outdated.

What Luke intended to convey, though, was not a long cartoonish stand-off. What he meant by this one short verse, most significantly, was that Jesus entered a place where, by what was all around him, the links between God and the world seemed completely severed. That space may well have been the barren desert areas of Judea, where, by all appearances nothing provided any sustenance. But the true wasteland was not the landscape. It was the growing conviction, deepened day by day, that Jesus had been left entirely to himself. And the devil was that perfect, singular voice that, with torturous repetition, intimately whispered that, therefore, Jesus alone mattered, for here there were no relations holding him in check, no bonds restricting his actions, no commitments remaining in his way. He was free to be anyone or anything he chose, without consequence. Sometimes abandonment can look a lot like freedom; just as, sometimes, freedom can feel a lot like abandonment. The point of decision, the crux of temptation, was whether it was better to live consciously in God's world, however tenuous that seemed, or to make the kingdom one's own, a world that's all about me. That space, for Jesus, lacked the glitter of Las Vegas, but it shared the same logic. Everything's erased, except one's own self. Thus everything's enticing, but nothing is real.

Is that holy, or is it horribly pathetic? Regardless, it remains, still, today, a stubborn, compelling temptation.

The beauty of this story is that, at its culmination, when the devil prods Jesus to stake his claim, each temptation involves a tangible interaction in life. We must eat, but we can't generate food by ourselves. It is given, the fruit of creation. We live embodied, physically balanced between safety and danger, vulnerable to accidents of many kinds. We share our world, inevitably, with others, more profoundly than we ever care to admit. We sometimes suffer other's power, and we desire it for ourselves, to wield as we see fit. Real life not only looks like this. It *is* this, a constant dependency and exchange, not only among innumerable parts, but bound all the more and inextricably to God, whose grace and providence secure all things. In this confidence we pray, noting that our very time, and therefore all of our selves, is first and always in God's hands.

This is the kingdom. It isn't where the real is forgotten. Just as it's not located in this city or that. It's not bread alone, nor is it any immersion in virtual circuses. The kingdom is present wherever and whenever we entrust our lives, in every respect, to the overarching power of God's redemption, holding ourselves to God with the resolute conviction that God holds himself to us in bonds that can't be dissolved. Our real freedom is this covenant, for we are granted, thereby, the ability, not to dismiss everything, but to engage all things more acutely, whether good or evil, joyful or grievous. For God himself, in Jesus, chose to live in precisely this manner and this trust.

This is a long way from Vegas, but it's where I'd rather be, entangled in this distinct, peopled, and enduring holiness rather than drifting alone amid a thousand false and transient fantasies. That is the choice we as the whole church can make, a choice we can make not only for ourselves alone but for the sake of the whole world.

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