

## The First Sunday in Lent; Year A (RCL)

Saint Paul's Cathedral, San Diego

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*Almighty God,*

*Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations;  
let each one find you mighty to save. Amen.*

That prayer comes from the Collect appointed for the first Sunday in Lent. Temptations abound this morning – Adam and Eve in the garden with the serpent, Jesus in the desert with the devil. The knowledge of good and evil, bread for the starving, safety from danger and death, all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor – tempting indeed. Adam and Eve go for it, Jesus refrains. Sin enters the story through the former choice, grace through latter.

Notice that these temptations all deal with immense issues. Good and evil, sustenance and safety, universal acclaim. We're not dealing here with puny concerns; chocolate obsession or wasteful spending or TV addiction or swearing off swearing. One temptation in early Lent is to preach pastoral sermons that send us into the season fussing over our personal gaffes, on the small things that trip us up. But, honoring the scope and magnitude of today's lessons, we're going to resist and focus instead on three huge temptations now facing the whole human family. I'm going to encourage you to resist the temptation to believe that God favors one type of person over others, one religion over others, and one nation over others. We'll take them one at a time.

First, do not be tempted to believe that God loves one type of human being more than another. Patterns of identification are indeed powerful but, for people of good faith, they're never privileged. This assertion pertains to the whole range of human variability; age and gender, race and orientation, class and educational level, ethnicity and physical ability, fluency and legal status. Our Sunday School teachers had it right – all, all, all are precious in God's sight. This, we hope, is a universal truth but the claim is particularly binding on the baptized. Paul could not have been clearer in his letter to the Galatians: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Now it's clearly the case that few are socially or publicly clumsy when it comes to this issue. We're better than we used to be in this area. We're sophisticated people, politically correct – we know better than to let feelings of superiority show. But we also know that we may still carry this sin within so, on this Sunday, we repent of it: "From all blindness of heart, from pride, vainglory, and hypocrisy, from envy, hatred and malice, and from all want of charity, Good Lord, deliver us."

Moving on. Do not be tempted to believe that God loves the believers of one faith more than others. This heresy lies at the heart of every religious war. *We're the ones who know the full truth, we're the ones nearest to God, we're the ones called to enforce God's dictates, we're the ones who can justify every action (no matter how violent) by invoking God's name and our holy text.*

There have been several books published lately attacking religion. Friends wonder how I'm handling this assault; I respond by asking them to pay attention to the kernel of truth in the critique. Bad religion has led to bad outcomes for too many people for too many

centuries; the sense of spiritual superiority is too often at the center of this unholy trauma.

Now someone could stop me here and ask the big question, the one that has to do with the unique identity of Jesus. If God doesn't prefer one religion over others, then why did Jesus come into the world and die on the cross? Doesn't the Christian claim insist on Jesus' ultimate supremacy over every other person, movement, philosophy, or faith?

That's a fair question, an important question, and one that doesn't invite simple, glib, off-the-cuff responses. Our best teachers and programs at this cathedral work that question regularly – we encourage you to take it up in a class, forum or Bible study. But let me say two things now in passing: First, remember that we're not weighing the relative merits of various faith claims right now – the temptation we're denouncing has to do with the false belief that God loves one set of adherents more than others. Second, being a Christian means, among other things, emulating Christ to the best of our ability. And who was Christ? The One who emptied himself of divine status, took the form of a servant, and died a criminal. He was the One who chose radical humility. He was quite purposeful about that. He was born in a barn, lived on the road, died on a cross. To assume a posture of religious superiority or spiritual arrogance in his name is to willfully and wildly negate the example of his own life. Instead, we best honor him when we stand under our neighbor, as humble as dust, so that we might better understand our neighbor's truth. When that happens, if that happens, our neighbor just might be interested in hearing ours.

Moving on. Do not be tempted to believe that God loves one nation more than others. But, you might ask, doesn't the Bible teach that? Isn't Israel, for instance, favored above all other nations? Yes, the Bible does say that and the Bible also undermines that same notion. Israel's primacy is asserted repeatedly – in the call to lay claim to the land of the Canaanites, for instance - but those from other lands are often identified as heroes in the story – the parable of the Good Samaritan works precisely because it isn't the parable of the Good Israelite. The Magi, foreign astrologers, are among the few that recognize the meaning of the birth of the Christ-child. Some of the first followers of Jesus thought that the gospel pertained only to Israel – Paul effectively blew up that notion as he took the good news throughout the Mediterranean world.

The idea that one tribe or nation is especially favored by God is a common theme in anthropology and history – Israel wasn't the only nation to hold such a view. Mayans, Japanese, Navajos and many others all held the same view at certain points in their history. The same notion got carried to this country at our founding – we were to be the city on a hill blessed of God, a light to the nations. When the English and Dutch moved into South Africa they understood they were receiving the new Promised Land from the hand of the creator. Again, none of that is surprising – in fact, it's more surprising when we fail to wrap our adventures and misadventures in a justifying myth.

But now, on this side of history, we know there are several ways to tell any story, several perspectives to consider. Parts of the story might be blessed, heroic, and parts hurtful, sinful. But just because there's a human tendency to cloak our narratives in myth doesn't mean that God is, in fact, upholding them. Looking back, we now trust that God had at least an equal concern for the people already resident in the various lands mentioned a moment ago – be they Canaanite or Mohican.

In the same way, we now pray for all people affected by the changes and chances of life. Few serious theologians would endorse the proposition that God takes sides in earthly

squabbles. Rather, they suggest that we bow down before the God who cries out for peace and who is most concerned with those most harmed by human conflict.

So what does all this mean? What do we go home with? All three of these temptations (the temptation to believe that God loves one type, one religion or one nation above all others) are rooted in a conception of God that is simply too small. God is very present (closer to us than we are to ourselves) but God is not local. God is very powerful but God is not using divine power to prosper some at the expense of others. God is very personal but God is not exclusively ours.

Small faith in a small god pursuing small purposes causes great harm. We, today, dispense with that puny god once and for all and give ourselves over to the highest and the best. We do so in the name of the one true God, loving and just, in whose spirit we receive truth and life. Amen.