

In these early days of Lent I know several of you have taken on a more focused effort on reading. There are few greater pleasures than reading a book that grabs you from the beginning and keeps your attention to the final page. There are few greater burdens than feeling an obligation to finish a book that is insufferably boring. So I share with you wisdom from C.S. Lewis on reading: if a book hasn't seized your interest by page 50, it's time to move on.

This is especially true with stories, whether fiction or nonfiction. In the early pages of a story, the author creates an atmosphere, gives us a setting and a place where the story occurs, adds textures with season, weather, or a historic era. But most of all, a writer must give us characters who interest us from the beginning—their background, their destiny, their conflicts. You can't know for sure if someone is a major or minor character in those early pages, but this a writer must do: introduce us to the main characters who will shape the arc of the story.

Since early December (with the exception of four Sundays), we've been reading Luke's story about Jesus. And Luke will be our guide these next forty days of Lent, following Christ to Jerusalem. Luke's story grabs you from the beginning, before Jesus is born. He introduces us to Zechariah and Elizabeth, who will bear a son, John the Baptist. We meet Joseph and Mary, who become the holy family when Jesus is born. Then we meet Simeon and Anna when Joseph and Mary bring their son to the Temple. Principal characters—some minor who exit stage right as Jesus ages; some major who become central to his life's mission. But there is one character in Luke's story that is hidden in plain sight—the Holy Spirit. /

Well, he's not *entirely* hidden. After all, we see the Spirit take center stage when Gabriel tells Mary the Holy Spirit will come upon you and you will conceive the Son of the Most High God. Then we see him descending upon Jesus in the form of a dove after his baptism in the Jordan River. But we don't usually notice his presence in other places either before or after these moments in the Gospel. It's like we're saying: 'Good to see you at Christmas and Epiphany! But bye for now! See you at Pentecost.'

But Luke doesn't dismiss the Spirit until he writes the Book of Acts. The Holy Spirit is no minor character in Luke's *Gospel*. Luke mentions the presence of the Holy Spirit more than all the other Gospel writers *combined*. He shows the presence of the Spirit in the early episodes of our beloved characters. Gabriel

tells Zechariah that his son, John the Baptist, will be filled with the Holy Spirit. Mary learns the Holy Spirit will conceive the Son of God within her. Elizabeth was filled with the Spirit when she met Mary, John leaping in Elizabeth's womb at the sound of Mary's voice. The Holy Spirit rested upon Simeon and spoke this prophecy, 'You will not die before you see with your own eyes the salvation of Israel.' John the Baptist said there is one greater than I who comes after me. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

And when John the Baptist meets the Lord in the River Jordan, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove. And then the Holy Spirit—who had been prophesying, speaking, overshadowing, filling, and descending—sends Jesus into the desert.

“And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry.”

Luke guides our eyes to see Jesus in the wilderness from a particular way. Physically, Jesus is empty, weak, and suffering. Inwardly, he is full of the Spirit; he follows the direction of the Holy Spirit in the wilderness. This is the paradox of Christ in the wilderness: inwardly full of the Holy Spirit, outwardly (physically) suffering in the most vulnerable conditions possible. /

[I recently watched a documentary about the era known as The Troubles in Ireland, an era of horrible violence in Ireland and Northern Ireland. This documentary featured the hunger strike of the Irish revolutionary Bobby Sands, who eventually died in prison in 1981.

The filmmakers told the stories of Sands' strike in an interesting way, reading his journals and displaying a graphic describing his physical and mental condition for each day of the strike, which lasted 66 days. Sands' condition was stable for about three weeks, but his decline began in the late 20s. When his strike passed the 30th day, his condition worsened considerably and hallucinations began.

That was the severity of bodily and mental weakness after day 30, indoors in a modern prison. Now consider that our Lord Jesus suffered so much more. No shelter, no food, facing brutal desert conditions which make the body so susceptible to the dangers of dehydration.] These are the moments when the

Enemy comes to tempt us, when we face intense bodily, mental, or emotional weakness.

In the midst of our exhaustion, Satan comes in the guise of a deliverer. St Paul says that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Satan will quote scripture—always in distorted ways, but he quotes scripture. He approaches us at strategic times, when we beg for pain and suffering to stop. He promises a way out and his way of salvation is the way of *spectacle*. Unless you dwell in the Holy Spirit, you will not perceive that you are being deceived.

It's plain enough to see the threefold temptation our Lord faces in the wilderness, but we don't often notice the *locations* of the temptations. After Jesus resists the first temptation to turn stones into bread, Satan raises the stakes and raises Jesus up. Satan is fond of elevation.

Unless your heart keeps watch with the Holy Spirit, you may not notice how the Enemy elevates you. For Jesus, Satan elevated him to the *pinnacle* of the temple and to a *pinnacle* of the world's kingdoms. For us, he elevates our ego, our self-importance, our self-justification, and most of all our self-love. Temptation is *elevation* as much as it is the specific desires of the flesh.

One of the most notorious ways our Enemy elevates us is by planting thoughts that lead us into fantasies of the mind. Satan always leads us into an unreal, imaginary future. He comes in the present moment, seeking to lead us *out of the present moment*. He creates imaginary fears in the mind so that we will cease trusting the Lord and begin to seize control of our future. It started in Eden: 'If you eat the fruit of that tree, you won't die. Your eyes will be opened!' As with the first Adam, so with the second Adam, 'These kingdoms will be yours! God will save you if you jump from the Temple!' Imaginary futures, all of them. Fantasies of the mind spoken to deliver us from the heat of the present moment.

[Return in your pew Bibles with me to Luke 4] Verse 4: "And the devil *took [Jesus] up* and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time... And [the devil] took Jesus to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple..." To stand on some elevated promontory viewing the kingdoms of the world; to be led to the pinnacle of Jerusalem's highest, holiest place—Satan lifts Jesus higher and higher, away from reality and into fantasy.

And here's what happens in Satan's fantasy world—he creates a narrative

where we become the hero. We're always the hero in our fantasy worlds. Salvation is always dazzling and spectacular, a display of our own power.

Think, for a moment, of the temptation of anger. Anger arises when we have been slighted or treated unfairly. These temptations always intensifies when it involves someone we love dearly. Read the desert fathers on the sin of anger and you'll notice it's just as much a meditation on friendship. In the imaginary arguments with our opponent, we have an airtight defense of our position. We win every argument. We always find vindication in the fantasies of the mind.

There's an Eastern Christian proverb that says, 'God is everywhere, except in your fantasies.' That's the essence of Jesus' perception of the Enemy's threefold deception. The Lord perceives the trap because he has trained his body, his mind, and his heart with the word of God.

Fred Bruner says of the temptation story that when Satan lifts Jesus higher and higher, Jesus turns the opposite direction. He makes a holy descent—down into the Word of God; down into the presence of the indwelling Spirit.

This is how the Holy Spirit reveals his power: by his descent. He descends and overshadows Mary when she conceives Jesus. He descends upon Jesus at his baptism. He leads Jesus into the barren wilderness, a descent into human weakness. But Jesus *trusts the Spirit's guidance* in the time of temptation. Jesus descends into the depths of God's Word, those words inspired by the Holy Spirit, given to Moses in the book of Deuteronomy.

You know what's interesting about each verse Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy? Those verses were all spoken by Moses *in the desert*. Deuteronomy was a book of *remembrance*, that God was faithful to provide and save his people—in the desert wilderness. Jesus remembers and dwells in that story of salvation. That is the reality in which Jesus lives. Whereas Satan would lead us to fantasyland, God always desires to redeem *reality* and transform the present moment with his power and glory.

This is why it's so essential to read scripture every day. If you're not baptizing your mind and heart in the whole story of God, you won't be ready for the hour of temptation. Because Satan quotes scripture too. He quotes scripture and he's crafty with his interpretation. When Satan quotes scripture, he tries to manipulate the meaning for *our* glory. It's not difficult to read the Bible and get

an endorsement from God for your own desires. Follow Satan's interpretation of scripture and he'll show you how to read the story so you're always the hero. That's why heresy is so serious. It leads to a fantasy world. But in the real world, Satan's reading of scripture always leads us to an utter betrayal of God.

Jesus renounces Satan's fantasy and embraces the truth of God's story—the Lord is always faithful to save, especially in the hour of our greatest weakness. That story was true for Israel in the wilderness and Jesus trusted it would be true in his story. Israel failed to believe God would be faithful in their hour of weakness, but where Israel failed, Jesus proved himself faithful.

Our reading concluded with verse 13, but to see Jesus' victory in the wilderness we need to read a bit further. Verse 14: "*And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country.*" He was full of the Spirit after his baptism, the Spirit led him into the wilderness of temptation and physical exhaustion, but by dwelling in the Word of God, Jesus returned in *the power of the Spirit*.

The Holy Spirit gives power when we renounce the lies and fantasies of the Enemy. There is power in weakness when we trust in the strength and salvation of God alone. St John Climacus called this kind of power 'the resurrection of lowliness.' God gives his victory to the meek and humble who trust in Him.

That's why Jesus could stand in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, full of the power of the Spirit, saying,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And what takes place after Jesus speaks in the power of the Spirit? He begins taking down the strongholds of the Enemy—the same Enemy he conquered in the desert. Chapter 4.31-37: Jesus goes from Nazareth to Capernaum and

confronts a demon-possessed man. Then Jesus rebukes the demons saying, 'Be silent and come out of him.' What did people say when they witnessed this? Verse 37: For with *authority and power* he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out!

Where does that authority and power come from? From trusting the faithfulness of God in the place of weakness. Read further in Luke and you'll see Jesus continuing his take-down of the Enemy's strongholds, healing those with deadly diseases, rebuking evil spirits.

My brother and sister, spiritual authority leads *through* the desert. Spiritual power comes for those who cling to the word of God, especially when they descend into mental, emotional and spiritual weakness. The devil fears fasting and prayer because that means a descent into the Holy Spirit of God, where power resides. Renounce the devil in the hour of temptation, his lies, and his fantasies and you will receive the power of the Holy Spirit. For the Spirit comes to heal and redeem the *real* world in which we live, all for the glory, not of our name, but for the one and only God whose Name is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.