

One of the first things you discover when you begin to study scripture is that for all the Bible is a sacred book, it is also literature, in the sense that the works of Shakespeare, or Chaucer, or Dickens, or any other great work of literature, is. The Bible is literally a “book of books”, comprising poems, historical narratives, legends, sagas, letters, laws, all wrapped up in the fabric of story.

I like to imagine the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, as literature, literature in the form of “remembrances of Jesus” written in the form of sacred story - the disciples relating their encounters with Jesus, either through personal experience, or received from others. And though we might not appreciate it, whenever we engage the Bible as story, we are doing so through the lens of our own story; each of us in conversation with God and with Jesus through sacred story.

The Gospel lessons for each of the Sundays during Lent recount a story of Jesus in the form of conversation. This Sunday, in Matthew’s version of the story of Jesus’ Temptation in the Wilderness, Jesus is in conversation with Satan. On the Second Sunday in Lent the Gospel of John relates a confusing dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus over the perplexing matter of “being born again - or born from above.” These kinds of dialogues continue through the Third Sunday in Lent when Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman at a well, whose longing in her life of faith is for what is real. On the Fourth Sunday in Lent we hear the story of a man blind from birth who has his sight restored by Jesus, which draws the Pharisees into a dialogue about the true identity of

Jesus. And finally, on the Sunday before Palm Sunday, we hear the wonderful story of the Raising of Lazarus, a conversation about death and resurrection.

Each of these Gospel stories, in one way or another, parallels our own story of faith. For which of us has not faced temptation, or tempted God in one form or another; which of us has not been confused over matters of religion or faith; and don't we all have a longing for that which is real in our faith journey, yet not quite able to identify it; which of us has never wondered about who Jesus really is, and what he does; and whenever we are brought face to face with our own mortality, either as we age, or through the death of a loved one, which of us has never wondered about death and resurrection. It does not take much thought to see that the people in the Bible mirror our story, ask our questions. The Bible as story is God's story writ large, especially in the season of Lent.

Lent invariably opens with the gospel story of the Temptation in the Wilderness, a dialogue between Jesus and Satan. In the Bible the wilderness is a thin place, where the boundary between heaven and earth is very permeable; and often an alien place where demons abide. The gospel witness of Matthew, Mark, and Luke agree that after his baptism Jesus was led (pushed) by the Spirit into the wilderness, there to be tested by the devil, or more precisely, for Satan to tempt Jesus to tempt God.

After a time of fasting Jesus is hungry, so Satan challenges Jesus to turn stones into bread and be filled. But Jesus knows that there is more to feeding the body than bread; the soul also has to be fed - by the Word of God. The devil then tempts Jesus to prove he

is the Son of God by throwing himself off the pinnacle of the Temple, so that the God's angels will save him. Jesus refuses, and reminds Satan we are called to trust God's promises, not test or exploit them. And finally, Satan offers Jesus power and dominion over all the kingdoms of the world, only for Jesus to remind Satan that God alone has such authority over God's creation.

The purpose behind each of these temptations is to see if Jesus will allow himself to be guided by his own ego, or by God; to do things that meet his own ends, or God's ends. The reason the story of the Temptation in the Wilderness is an important story to open the season of Lent is that Lent is that thin place where we are supposed to step into our own story and ask ourselves whether or not we are following the kingdoms of the world, or of God. The temptations Jesus faced we also face - bread, safety, the kingdoms of the world - these are real needs and desires, and we seek them and sometimes are tempted by them. Thus we are reminded that the over-arching theme of the Gospels is Jesus' humble obedience to God's will.

So, the season of Lent is not so much owning our temptations than about trusting that God in Christ is involved in our story - in conversation with us - a divine dialogue as we write our own story of faith. Wherever you look in the Bible we see that temptation does not come to us because we are sinners, but because we are human beings. And the Bible stories remind us that we can do nothing for God that God has not already done for us.

The season of Lent is not so much about repentance of sins, as opening our hearts to God in faith and trust.

Clement of Alexandria, a second century Christian saint, wrote: *If you truly desire to see God, betake yourself to Christ.* In other words, in the season of Lent, join him in the wilderness, where he has joined us; share your story with him - there you will find grace.

*Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*