

Sermon for First Sunday in Lent

March 1, 2020

The Holy Eucharist

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year A: Genesis 2:4b–9, 15–17, 25–3:7; Psalm 51:1–13; Romans 5:12–19;*

Matthew 4:1–11

The story of Jesus' baptism is found in Mark, Matthew, and Luke.¹ In all three gospels, the Spirit drives, or leads, Jesus into the wilderness for forty days. Moses received the tables of the law on Mount Sinai after being there for forty days. When he came down with the tables in his hands and saw the golden calf, he threw them down and they broke. Moses would go up a second time, and this second time he fasted from food and water before he received the tablets of the law. Unlike Mark, Matthew and Luke include an account, from what we call the Sayings Source, of Jesus' testing or temptation—take your pick²—in the wilderness.

There's a long history of Hebrew rabbinical dialogues in which arguments are settled by quoting the law of Moses.³ But it's not just a form of religious dialogue. Back in the day, before seminary, when I studied South

¹ Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:1–20.

² Compare: Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 147, and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007), 65–66.

³ Harrington, 69.

Asian history, my work included learning Urdu—the language of Muslims in Pakistan and in parts of northern India. Anyone growing up speaking Urdu knows a lot of Urdu poetry because of its use in everyday conversation. There is a hierarchy of poets, and can score, as it were, by shifting from Urdu-language poetry to Persian-language poetry—one of the source languages for Urdu. If memory serves, a quotation from the fourteenth-century Persian poet Hafez is a likely winner.⁴

In the wilderness, the devil knows who Jesus is, and it becomes clear that Matthew’s Jesus knows who he himself is. He never waivers in his obedience to his Father, even with his cry from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?,”⁵ Matthew’s Jesus, is Emmanuel, God with us.⁶ As in John’s gospel, Jesus is the final agent of his death. He himself gives up his spirit.⁷

Massey Shepherd, in his commentary on the 1928 Prayer Book, published in 1950 in the aftermath of the Second World War, wrote on today’s gospel lesson that

⁴ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/hafez>, (accessed 1 March 2020).

⁵ Psalm 22:1.

⁶ Matthew 1:23.

⁷ Matthew 27:50; John 19:30.

the power of “material prosperity and external excitements . . . are ever the tactics of ‘false Christs.’ ”⁸ I trust Shepherd was not thinking just of Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin. Genocide was already going on in this world when that century began—as it is ongoing in our own day.

It’s hard sometimes to live with the reality that God did not fix the problem of human sin by Jesus simply healing humankind. Instead, God has revealed God’s self in life, death, and resurrection of his Son. New Testament scholar Matthew Luz, in his commentary on this passage, writes that “Jesus refuses to perform a miracle that is not commanded by God.”⁹

Professor Luz “wonders” if this story has come to Matthew shaped by the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer: daily bread, protection from testing, and doing God’s will¹⁰—perhaps it also helped to shape the dialogue in Luke.

Though today’s gospel from Matthew is the ancient, traditional lesson in the Christian West for this First

⁸ Massey H. Shepherd, Jr., *The Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 126–27.

⁹ Luz, 151.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 152.

Sunday of Lent, it's not really about us or a season of a church year unknown to any of the New Testament authors. It's about that question that Jesus posed to his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" In a large way, just by being here you and I are saying something very profound about who Jesus is for us in our journeys in this life.

One of the guys I know because we go to the same gym at the same time most mornings of the week and our lockers are close to each other, asked me the day after the deaths of Kobe Bryant, his daughter, and the others in the helicopter accident, how do I understand the tragedy. I ended up quoting words from the seventeenth-century Anglican bishop Jeremy Taylor, "make us, we beseech thee, deeply sensible of the shortness and uncertainty of human life."¹¹ It turns out he had grown up also in what we used to call a "mixed marriage." His father was Jewish, his mother Roman Catholic. They sent him to Trinity School (Episcopal) here in the city. I sent him the prayer from the Prayer Book. He said his staff found it very helpful.

In his remarks on Jesus' crucifixion, Luz quotes the writing of a Jew who died in the Warsaw ghetto in 1943,

¹¹ *The Book of Common Prayer* [1928], 316.

who had hidden his writings in an empty bottle behind a wall. He wrote, “I believe in the God of Israel, even when He has done everything to make me cease to believe in Him.”¹²

There’s a prayer in the 1662 English Prayer Book¹³ that made it into our Prayer Book in 1928,¹⁴ but not our 1979 book, that I find to be helpful for my struggle with what’s wrong in this world and what I know to be wrong in my life. It’s called, “A Prayer for a Sick Person, when there appeareth but small hope of Recovery”:

O Father of mercies, and God of all comfort, our only help in time of need; We fly unto thee for succour in behalf of this thy servant, here lying in great weakness of body. Look graciously upon him, O Lord; and the more the outward man decayeth, strengthen him, we beseech thee, so much the more continually with thy grace and Holy Spirit in the inner man. Give him unfeigned repentance for all the errors of his life past, and stedfast faith in thy Son Jesus; that his sins may be done away by thy mercy, and his pardon sealed

¹² Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 551.

¹³ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1662), 321.

¹⁴ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1928), 316.

in heaven; through the same thy Son, our Lord and Saviour. *Amen.*

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Copyright © 2020 The Society of the Free Church of St. Mary the Virgin, New York, New York.

All rights reserved.