

Trinity Church
February 3, 2008

Lent 1
RCL, Year A, Lent 1

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

*Great are the tribulations of the wicked;
But mercy embraces those who trust in the Lord. Amen.*

Last Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, I spoke about those thin places in our lives, where our lives, and our world, come so close to God, and God's world, that they actually overlap. I said that what happens to us when we do as Jesus asks us to do in that secret and thin place is like what C. S. Lewis wrote that Lucy was doing when she fell through the wardrobe into Narnia, or what Harry Potter and his friends do when they cross onto Platform 9 ½ at Paddington Station. We fall into God's world, and there we see everything differently.

At his baptism, the heavens were opened for Jesus, the Spirit of God poured over him, the voice of God's love spoke to him. God's world and Jesus' humanity and Jesus' world overlapped. Jesus would never see anything the same again, but now always in the echo of that voice, in the power of that Spirit, in the light of God's heavenly kingdom.

In the wake of this experience, Jesus found himself in the wilderness, hungry and weakened from forty days of fasting. He was in agonizing conflict. He was tempted.

You would think that the outpouring of the Spirit and the voice of God would push you into a good place, overflowing with milk and honey and joy, but it doesn't. It didn't for Jesus and it doesn't for us either. It pushes us into conflict — into temptation. C. S. Lewis knew this, so when Lucy goes back to fetch her siblings, she is confronted with their disbelief, which causes her to question her own experience. Harry Potter has the same problem with his Muggle family, the dreaded Dursleys, who will never understand him, are ashamed of him, and yet are envious of his powers and his friends.

If you have no knowledge of God; if you have never heard God's voice or seen God's kingdom, or been anointed with God's Spirit, then there is no temptation. The world is just the way it is. We know nothing different. But once God happens to you, then the struggle begins, between God's way and ours. Between good and evil, between embracing life or choosing to live in death. We live with constant temptation.

In the face of temptation, Jesus made a startling response. Jesus was able to experience his relationship with God, his Father, as a deeper reality than his outward circumstances, or his personal needs or cravings or the power of evil. Second, Jesus was able to say "No." The grace of God's embrace was the gift and fortitude to say no. And finally, the only words that Jesus speaks are God's words as recorded in Scripture. Jesus says to the Tempter each time, "It is written."

Our liturgy contains these words: "Jesus was tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin. By his grace we are able to triumph over every evil, and to live no longer for ourselves, but for him who died for us and rose again." These remarkable words say that in Christ and through Christ, we, yes, you and I, we are able to respond to temptation as Jesus did. We are able to experience our life in Christ, by Christ, through Christ, as a greater reality than any temptation. We are able, therefore, to say "no" and we are able to speak God's Word of Truth. Paul says that this is what it means to be saved, or as he writes, "those who receive the abundance of

grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.”

The story of Jesus’ temptations is not a frightening tale of the power of Satan or of the inevitability of conflict. No, it is a story of God’s grace by which we, with Christ, are able to triumph over every evil in this life, that we are able to live, not just for ourselves, but we are able to live in him who died for us and rose again.

Our Lent is first and foremost an invitation to embrace that abundance of grace that Christ has given us, and to claim and exercise that dominion in life that is God’s gift to us in Jesus.

Will Willimon, the theologian and author, was leading a Bible study on temptation. He asked, “Have you ever faced temptation, and, with Jesus’ help, resisted it?” People said this and that little thing. Then Verleen spoke, “A couple of years ago, I was into cocaine ... You know how that stuff makes you go crazy. Well, anyhow, my boyfriend and I, we knocked over a gas station one night — two hundred dollars. Well, my boyfriend, he says to me, ‘Let’s knock over the 7-11 too.’ And something says to me, No, I ain’t gonna hold up no convenience store. He beat on me, but I still said no. It felt great to say no. Made me feel like somebody.”

Verleen is right. It feels great to live in Christ and in the grace of God, to feel that dimension of life that the Spirit of Jesus gives us. This Lent, you can feel like somebody, too.