

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The First Sunday of Lent
February 14, 2016

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Somewhere in the writings of Saint Augustine the Incarnation is described as the devil's *mousetrap*. Almighty God entered His creation in such a lowly and humble out-of-the-way set of circumstances that the Son of God become Son of Mary was born without the devil taking notice. The Saviour's birth at Bethlehem was "*under the radar*."

On the First Sunday of Lent our gospel is always the great incident known as the Temptation of Christ. And we know that Christ was tempted in every way we are yet did not sin. But something else was also going on in the wilderness. The devil did not know Jesus of Nazareth was the Divine Son of God. Had he known, Satan would not have *dared* approach Almighty God the way he did. Was Jesus really Son of God or was He a man uniquely favored by God? The modern mindset does not see the difference. *But the devil did!* If Jesus is only a man, even a *good* man like Job, the devil can get him to give in to these temptations. But if Almighty God has entered His creation in human flesh then the devil's days are numbered.

At various times in Our Lord's ministry it is *the demons* who are first to identify Jesus as the Christ. But it does not follow they knew for sure that Jesus is Son of God. The jury was out because the temptation in the wilderness had not led to a definite conclusion. We are told the devil left the Lord "*for a more opportune time*." You may remember in the film *The Passion of the Christ*, the opening scene is in the Garden of Gethsemane. And the devil, in great agitation, is repeatedly asking "*Who are You?*" No wonder the devil is agitated! He sees the Cross ahead and smells a rat! When the devil had left Jesus in the wilderness the news had not been good for Hell. For if the Conqueror of Hell had come to earth, the devil would get his walking papers!

It was important for the Lord's disciples to know about these temptations. *So Jesus told them*. Some people are surprised by that statement. But in the wilderness no mention is made of eyewitnesses. Which is easier to believe? Did Jesus tell His disciples about the temptations? Or did the evangelists interview the devil? But in the Lord's description He left out the *fierceness* of the confrontation. By that I do not mean Jesus was close to giving in! But we who so easily cave in to temptations cannot begin to imagine the unbearable repugnance and horror the pure nature of

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Christ felt in the presence of evil, with all its ugly and twisted forms of disorder, disaster, and pain. Evil is so far from the holiness of perfect love. The gap is not calculable by the human mind. It is the declaration of both Old and New Testaments that evil is destroyed by God's Presence. Just as darkness is destroyed in the presence of light, holiness is stronger than evil. That is in the nature of things in God's creation. And so it is impossible for us to comprehend the terrible fierceness of this encounter of the Son of God with Satan. It was only out of love for us and our redemption that God in the flesh did not destroy evil outright.

God the Father permitted His Beloved Son to be assaulted by this indecent and sacrilegious devil. In His Wisdom God allows for your spiritual trial and mine as well. Our trials are permitted to work for our good end. We know it is a good end because God Who allows it is good. We are not always confident about what goes on while we are on our way to the good end! We know that our good end is not inevitable. But Our Heavenly Father's purpose for you and me is achieved partly through our battle with evil. That conflict increases our spiritual strength; it proves *to us* our love for God; and our victory over temptation wins a glorious triumph for the One we say we love.

Saint Paul knew a few things about temptation and suffering. Yet he confidently assured the Corinthians that "God is faithful who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able: but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it." *I Corinthians 10:13* That way to escape was forged out in the wilderness beyond Jordan, in basic human equipment, by Our Blessed Lord Jesus. And He endured it for our sake and our salvation.