

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The First Sunday of Lent
March 10, 2019

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When we make an annual trip to New York City there is often a visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. And in the museum shop I look for postcards of the *Merode Altarpiece*. This beautiful work was created by a 15th Century Flemish master named Robert Campin. The subject of the altarpiece is the Annunciation and you can see it in the great medieval collection at The Cloisters on the upper west side of Manhattan.

In the left panel of the triptych are the kneeling donors. And while the Annunciation is taking place in the middle section, on the right side St Joseph is in his workshop making *mousetraps*! While he is working on one of these, a finished product is on the open window ledge looking out into the town center, which looks more like 15th Century Bruges or Ghent than Nazareth. For my money seeing St Joseph making mousetraps is alone worth the bus fare and price of admission.

Robert Campin had no warrant for showing St Joseph making mousetraps unless he had heard about it in a sermon. And he probably had. Somewhere in the writings of Saint Augustine the Incarnation is described as “the Devil’s mousetrap.” Almighty God entered His creation in a lowly and humble out-of-the-way set of circumstances. While the Devil kept watch on Jerusalem, these events took place in backwater Nazareth and Bethlehem. The coming of Christ was *under the radar*.

That being so, the Temptation of Christ by the Devil in the wilderness is *a different type of confrontation* than we often think. Temptation means *testing*. And the devil was conducting a series of experiments or tests in order to find out whether this Jesus of Nazareth was a man uniquely favored by God or was He indeed Son of God. Church history is full of heretics who don’t see the difference. But the Devil does! If Jesus is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity the Devil’s suggestions will have no influence on Him at all. But if Jesus is only a man, even *a very good man like Job*, he is fair game for Satan’s crafty bag of tricks. The Devil needs to know.

In several incidents in Our Lord’s ministry it is the demons who are first to acclaim Jesus as Christ. He makes these demons keep silent. But it does not follow they knew *for sure* Jesus is Son of God. It may be they *guessed* His identity from the

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results of the experiments conducted in the wilderness. Those temptations did not lead to a definite conclusion. We are told the Devil left the Lord “for a more opportune time.” In that regard you might remember the vision of Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich made into the film *The Passion of the Christ*. In the opening scene in Gethsemane the Devil is still inquiring of Jesus “Who are You?” And the Devil is extremely agitated. For when he withdrew from Jesus at the end of the temptations in the wilderness the news was not good for Hell. If the Conqueror of Hell has come to earth in man’s flesh, the Devil’s days are numbered!

Our Lord Jesus thought sufficient of these temptations to describe them in great detail to His disciples. That is the only way we know about them. The evangelists didn’t interview the Devil! And there were no bystanders in the wilderness. But Jesus did not describe the *fierceness* of the encounter. By that it is not meant Our Lord came close to being defeated! But we, who so easily cave in to temptations, cannot begin to imagine the total repugnance and horror the perfect and unfallen nature of Christ felt at 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 and the gap is not calculable by the human mind. It is impossible for us to comprehend the terrible fierceness of this encounter of Our Lord with Satan.

What we *do* know is God the Father permitted His beloved Son to be assaulted by this indecent and sacrilegious Devil, and that 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. Our Father’s purpose for you and me is achieved partly through our battle with evil. When St Antony defeated the demons in the desert he asked why God had not helped him. And the Lord replied “I wanted to see you fight.”

St Paul knew a thing or two about temptation and suffering. Yet he confidently assured the Corinthian Church “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.” (*1 Cor. 10:13*) That “way to escape” was hammered out in basic human equipment in the terrible encounter Our Blessed Lord endured *for our sake* in the wilderness beyond Jordan.