

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The First Sunday of Lent
February 21, 2021

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There is a strange little incident described in the middle chapters of *The First Book of the Kings*. By that time the Hebrew nation had been split in two. Rehoboam quickly made a mess of things in Judah, and Jeroboam in the north never met an idolatry or other apostasy he didn't like. An unnamed prophet of the Lord came from Judah to confront Jeroboam at Bethel. The condemnation was so emphatic the prophet was told to eat no meal there and to go back home by a different route. On his way home, the prophet was intercepted by an old man who said, "I also am a prophet of the Lord as you are, and an angel told me 'bring him back with thee to thine house, that he may eat bread and drink water.'" Scripture adds ominously, "But he lied to him." Sadly, the prophet accepted the old man's invitation and went back, and he came to a quick end.

The incident may be historical. But why is it part of *salvation* history? The answer may be that the false prophet, the one who lied, is the self-love of the man of God.

Self-love comes to us in various disguises. Part of the work of habitual prayer is to throw off these disguises so our intentions may be pure. Self-love never stops trying to deflect us from purity of intention. Our intentions are pure to the degree in which self-love has died in them. Self-love lied to the prophet, and lured him to accept a lower calling than the one from the Lord. A clue to this meaning comes at the very end of the incident. The false prophet, having buried the man he lied to, leaves instructions that when the time comes, he is to be buried in the same grave. "Let my bones lie with his bones."

Something of that sort is going on in the Lord's temptation in the wilderness. Remember, God Incarnate lived in the same basic human equipment issued to you and me. Self-love must have told Jesus after His Baptism He did not have time to go into the wilderness. We are told the Holy Spirit led Him there, or even *drove* Him there. In the subsequent battle, it was suggested to Jesus His body needed to be satisfied. And it was put in the Lord's mind if He did something suicidal, like jumping off the temple roof, this would show He had faith. A voice told Jesus His mission would succeed if He got the whole world to come to Him, never mind the means.

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All of this shows the many disguises and appeals of self-love. But the Lord had God's answer to each. He did not want the world simply to come to Him and remain unchanged. It was of no interest to Almighty God to fill churches with people who then go out exactly as they came in. The call of the Church is not to fill pews but to fill Heaven! In all these ways Christ pulled the mask off self-love. And when He did that the devil was exposed.

Why do we know about all this? Only *two persons* were present in the wilderness. And the evangelists didn't interview the devil! The Lord Jesus wants us to know we must also die to self-love. Think of how our lives can often seem so small and petty, doing nothing in return for His love. Jesus is ready to face forty days and forty nights and do anything else for us love can do. The devil can't defeat Him. In fact the only thing that can defeat Jesus in our souls is our self-love.

Lent invites us to focus on the fact self-love is always coming at us in some way. The only way to defeat it is to be quite straight with ourselves, and quite straight with God. We learn to see clearly only through penitence and prayer. That enables us to pull down the disguises from the false prophet of our self-love and send it packing. When we do, we won't go out exactly as we came in. Following the directions given the prophet of the Lord, we will go home by a different way.