

Tempter and Temptation
Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11
March 13, 2011

Many of us are still reeling from the news of the massive earthquake that struck Japan this past Friday. Our hearts also go out to our sisters and brothers of Hawaii and the entire Western Coast and all the other regions of what is known as “the Ring of Fire.” We have been transfixed to our televisions to see what is going to happen also with the **nuclear reactors there in Japan. Some folks are comparing** the possibilities of what could occur there to the horrific events of the atomic bomb being dropped in Hiroshima, all over again.

It is during times such as these that we ask the very difficult questions of God. “If you are a loving God, why would you allow for such death and destruction when you could have prevented it? Why do these events keep happening, God, when you can protect your children? Why, God, do we find ourselves facing yet **another natural disaster of such horrific magnitude?** What, God, would you have us to do now?”

These are all very difficult questions. In pondering such questions I am reminded of what the apostle Paul says to us, just as he spoke to our sisters and **brothers in Corinth, “For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ...For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”** (I Corinth. 13:9, 10, 12) Paul reminds us, **as we cry out to God, that we do not find answers to all** of our why questions, but we do find reassurance that God is present. God is present in the midst of our fears and our doubts and God is big enough to understand that those questions come from our own feelings of loss, sadness, and our desire to comfort

those whose grief is almost unbearable. It is a season in our lives in which we question and tempt God to prove Godself so as to make the situation better.

We have now entered the season of “Lent.” It is a time of renewal and new life, a “spring” season in our faith lives. It is a time of letting go and taking in. It is a time of reflecting **upon who we are and whose we are. It is 40 days** and 40 nights of reexamining our lives and our relationship with God. We are called during this time to explore those parts of our lives which hold us back in our relationship with God and loving relationships with one another, it is a time of repentance for **our sins, and it is a time of nurturing a new relationship** with God. It is a time of letting go and taking in.

As we look at today’s gospel reading in which Jesus conquers the temptations he is faced with, we come face to face with something we human beings have struggled to let go of since the origin of human kind, a desire to be self sufficient. He let go of any desire to be self sufficient and self serving to meet the **needs of the world. Jesus looked beyond self** to see there were those around him whose needs were greater.

In the wake of the current disasters we can see the millions of people who have need. We can see the damage that has been done to the ecology of numerous regions. As people of faith we can see **beyond ourselves and beyond our own** needs at this time, can we not? Yes, some among us still struggle with unemployment and financial concerns, but when you see that thousands have died, all of a sudden we get a new perspective on what we have and who the people are in our lives that we love and how much we care about them. Our circle of care often expands during times of crisis. Most of us want to do something to help our **neighbors in need. Sadly, there are those for whatever** reason choose to turn away or to blame such events upon the wrath of an angry God. This is an affront to the God of the gospels. A God whose Son repeatedly shows us and tells us of

God's love, grace, mercy and compassion towards us. Let us not forget Jesus response to the grief he saw in Mary and Martha at the death of their brother, "Jesus wept." (Jn. 11:35) Jesus understands our grief, because he experienced it.

Jesus not only understands our grief because he experienced it, but he also understands our need **for God to prove Godself because he experiences** that too, in us. If we are honest with ourselves, as we read today's gospel, we can also put ourselves in the position of tempter when it comes to our relationship with God. Quite often we seek to bargain with God, don't we? "God, if you are truly powerful and loving, then you will heal my mother of her disease and we will be in church every Sunday. If you don't then I'll never set foot in church again." "God, if you would just help me to pass this test, I promise I will study harder next time **and give my all to you.**" "**God, if you help me get this** job, I promise I will tithe more to the church." We tempt God to prove Godself to us in our faith walk, when in Christ Jesus we see not only who the Son is, but we see who God is. We see that God is trustworthy.

Where does our need for God to prove Godself come from? Let us look to our reading from Genesis. In that reading we have the serpent in dialogue with Eve; even though Adam was present, see verse 6. The serpent seems to tap into what is something of an innate sense of suspicion within us human beings for interpreting God's words and actions. "...*the yearnings and suspicions of the humans about God's motivations are somehow already embedded within the human heart from the beginning and simply needed the encouragement of the serpent to bring them out and convert them into action.*" (D. Olson) The serpent says to Adam and Eve of eating from the tree of good and evil, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of [the tree] your eyes will be opened and you **will be like God, knowing good and evil.**" (3: 5) "*In this way the serpent sows the seeds of mistrust, inviting Adam and Eve to fulfill the deep want and need that*

is at the core of being human not through their relationship with God but by seizing the fruit that is in front of them. It is the temptation to be self-sufficient, to establish their identity on their own, that seduces the first humans.” (Lose)

*Might it be that a part of being human is being aware that we are **insufficient, that we are not complete in and of ourselves, that lack is a permanent part of our condition?** To be human, in other words, is to be aware that we carry inside ourselves a hole, an emptiness that we will always be restless to fill. [Sadly we often try to fill our emptiness with things, like bread. We try to fill our emptiness with large homes, large cars, as much as the eye can see. We try to fill our emptiness by bowing down to the false gods of avarice, greed, and power. It is Jesus who says **“No” to all of that on our behalf. Ultimately we come** to know the truth, that in acquiring those things and following the false gods around us we still feel a hole in our lives.] *Blaise Pascal once described this essential condition of humanity as having a "God-shaped hole," and this is what Jesus demonstrates. There is no filling of that gap, no permanent erasing that hole, **except in and through our relationship with God.** Or, as Augustine said, we humans are always restless until we rest in God. (Lose)**

Jesus not only rested in God, but he filled himself with the word of God. Jesus remains dependent on God because Jesus knows who he is, by remembering whose he is. That is how he responded to the temptations he faced, Jesus quoted **scripture to counter the easy fixes being offered to him.** He was able to stand on the truth because he knew the truth, it was in him and it must be for us as well. These were not just words to him, but they were an active part of his everyday living. We must do the same equipping of ourselves with God’s word so that when we are tempted to be self sufficient and **self serving, we are reminded of Jesus** command that we love one another. To love is to care, to care is to do.

Even though “*we humans are always restless until we rest in God,*” we **know fully that God’s love is there for us during this time of crisis.** While we may only see dimly during this time, we can take comfort that we are known fully by God. It is our faith that helps us, as we ask the difficult questions of God, to trust that **and to learn with Paul, that God's grace is sufficient for us.** It is faith that helps us to go forward during our times of trials, doubts, and temptations, not merely surviving them, but growing in the midst of the uncertainty. It is equipping ourselves with the word of God that helps us to see that what we seek in this life can only truly be found in God and not the lure of **easy fixes and false gods.** *It is Jesus who now invites us to find both hope and courage in the God who named not only him, but all of us, beloved children so that we, also, might discover who we are by recalling whose we are. Amen*