

Lent 1—Year C

In these past few years, I find myself getting more forgetful. I walk into a room with some intention and forget why I am there.

Some forgetting is humorous. You don't know why your keys are in the flowerpot or your purse is in the bathroom. But there is a deeper forgetting which is serious. We forget who we are. We forget we are children of God. We forget we are baptized Christians; we forget the Baptismal Covenant. If we are Sisters, we forget the promises that we made when we entered as Postulants and Novices. We forget that we have taken vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. We forget community decisions we have made in the past. If we are Associates or Oblates, we forget the promises we have made. If we are ordained, we forget what was going on when the bishop laid his hands on us. And when we forget who we are, we forget to be grateful. We are no longer defined by who we are; we are no longer guided by who we are. We are simply loose cannons, our only identity shaped by whatever momentary annoyance crosses our path. Then we are capable of doing and saying harmful things.

Memory is perhaps the most important of notions for the Jewish people. Today's Old Testament reading contains a passage that is thought by many to be the most momentous in all the Jewish Scriptures. "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there..." So it begins. And it goes on to tell the story with which we are so familiar, the story of the Exodus, of Moses and Aaron, and the Ten Commandments. It is this story by which all faithful Jewish people define themselves. It is the memory of these events that makes them who they are.

Lent is a time for remembering and for discovery. Jesus went into the wilderness for forty days to remember who he was and to discover what he was called to do. The devil helped him along by offering three temptations. It is easy to fall to temptations when we are not remembering who we are.

I would like to look at the temptations which the devil presented to Jesus in reverse order. The third temptation reads "The devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor and he said to him, "All these I will give you if you will fall down and worship me." The obvious temptation here is to wealth and political power.

But suppose we broaden it to include any kind of power seeking. I am sorry to think of the number of times I have given in to the temptation to appear more capable, more generous, or even more compassionate than others. Or how many times do I want to have the last word in a conversation?

Probably each one of us can think of times in our lives when someone's need for status made things difficult for us. When I was first on a convent leadership team, I was one of 4 sisters who rotated being in charge of the house. Most of us didn't like the job, because it was simply added on to all the other jobs we already had. But there was a certain amount of status attached to it because current and former heads of houses had more voice in decision-making. My most difficult problem as head of house was that there was another sister in the group—much older than I— who felt I was too new and too young to have this job, and wouldn't co-operate. I went to my spiritual director with this problem, and he knew the convent very well because he was director for maybe half of us. "Some of your people want to be heads of houses or want to prevent others from becoming heads of houses," he said. People want to be president of their business, they want to win contests and awards. Why do we hanker for such small things? Supposing you or I should become President of the United States. That would be nothing compared to what we are already—children of God. So if we must strive to be something, let us strive to recognize ourselves as the most beloved of God." Let us not forget who we are.

In the second temptation, the devil invites Jesus to jump off the pinnacle of the temple and see if God will save him. The temptation presented here is to prove his spirituality through magic or psychic power. There is a story in the Indian tradition of a man who works for many years to overcome laws of nature. One day he meets a sage and the sage asks him, "Well, what have you achieved after all these years?" The man replies, "See, I've learned to walk on water." And he gives a little demonstration by walking across a river. The sage says, "I can do the same thing. I just pay a dollar and take the ferry." Well, we may not try to learn to walk on water, but it is easy to be tempted to stop short of real spiritual life, perhaps contenting ourselves with a good feeling or a spiritual gift like the power of healing. Healing is a gift, but it's not the same thing as the Giver of the gift.

The first temptation is the most subtle and difficult of all. "Command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Suppose we think of the need for bread as not just our need for physical nourishment,

but the need of all people for physical, mental, and spiritual nourishment. That's a very real thing. Don't we need to do something about it? I think where we have erred in the western world is in too much emphasis on doing as opposed to being. There is no way to express how difficult the temptation to over-activity is, because some activity is necessary. Everyone knows that taking the Boy Scouts on a camping trip is a good thing. But going on a retreat is probably still suspect in these days of the "spiritual but not religious." As for those who attend Search Programs, you must be a real puzzlement to your friends at home. Many times I have sat down for prayer and then remembered something I was supposed to do. Then I have to discern what's going on. Do I really need to do that thing right now? Am I just rationalizing my restlessness of mind? If we are not returning to the being of prayer on a regular basis, it is too easy to fall to the temptations that obscure who we are. We forget.

Jesus came out of the wilderness knowing who he was and what his mission was. No temptations could distract him, could make him forget who he was. So...we may forget our car keys, our gloves, our sweater, our umbrella, even forget to come to a community meeting. But may we never forget who we are. May we not fall prey to the temptations that blind us, make us forget our identity. But may we remember our essence, our foundation our very being in God. Amen.