

3.1.2026 Lent 2 (Matthew 15:21-28)

I was recently watching a clip from an old documentary that told the story of a man who lived in what's commonly called the African Bush - a completely wild, entirely undeveloped area in southern Africa. In this clip the man was searching for water because he was on a prolonged journey into an even more remote area, and this video told the story of the method he used to find it. As I watched this footage, I was fascinated to learn that the baboons who live there, quite wisely, don't want to reveal the location of their water supply, perhaps especially to humans, but this man had a proven method he used to trick baboons into leading him directly to it.

Knowing that they're naturally inquisitive, the man would drill a relatively small hole into a termite mound, and then making sure that a baboon was watching him, he'd place some wild melon seeds inside the hollow area in this mound. He'd then walk a short distance away knowing the baboon was burning with curiosity about what was placed in that hole, his inquiring mind had to know, and sure enough in just a matter of minutes the animal was so overcome by this feeling that he approached the mound, reached into the hole, and grabbed the seeds, but with his hand closed in a tight fist it was now too big to fit back through the hole. He was trapped, and he'd need to let go of what was in his hand in order to remain free, but as the man approached with a rope the baboon refused to do so. He held on tight to those seeds, and was captured. The clip ended with the man giving the baboon some tasty salt to eat, and the animal became so thirsty that when the rope was finally taken off him, he ran straight to the secret water supply not caring at all who followed him.

When I watched this video, the animal lover in me was relieved to see the man let the baboon go free. It was good for the heart to watch him run straight to the water, take a long drink, and wander off, but the thought that brought no peace of mind was the knowledge of how often our enemy uses one of his own proven methods to deceive us, and we act just like that baboon. We reach down into a hole to take hold of something that is meant to take us captive, namely sin, and then refuse to let go. Often, even when we see the consequences coming toward us, we choose to continue to cling to something that leads to our captivity.

Like a baboon that's captured because he didn't have the good sense to let go of a few melon seeds, we can be taken captive by sin because our good sense, our ability to reason through these things is as wounded as our fallen human nature, and what's far worse in our case is to know that when we're caught, the evil one who has lured us into the trap has no intention of letting us go so easily. Therefore St. Peter warns Christians to *"Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour"* (1 Peter 5:8), and St. Paul, writing to Timothy, speaks of those who oppose him as being trapped in *"the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will"* (2 Timothy 2:26).

The troubling images these verses bring to mind of being devoured by the enemy, or captured to do his will should disturb us. The human saints who wrote these words, and God, the Divine Author who inspired them, want us to recognize the danger lurking behind what may appear to be a harmless temptation. For a baboon it may be a few melon seeds, for you and I maybe it's a judgmental thought, or the desire to speak an unkind word or perform a selfish act, but no matter how harmless something may seem, we can be certain the enemy intends to harm us or others with every temptation.

Consider this warning from St. James concerning temptation, and the path that it may lead us down. He tells us that *"each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death"* (James 1:14). The one whose goal is to capture us, for obvious reasons would have us believe that temptation will not lead to anything that will hurt us at all, but St. Peter wrote about being devoured, St. Paul spoke of being captured, and St. James tells us that temptation lures us into desire, desire gives birth to sin, and sin brings forth death. Therefore, it shouldn't surprise us at all that God, in the Person of Jesus Christ, who desires not the death of a sinner, spoke this warning, *"Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak"* (Matthew 26:41).

The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. There is a great struggle in every one of us between, on one side, the God-given spiritual desire to know, love, and serve our Lord in this life, and on the other, the weakness of our human flesh. Even one of the greatest heroes of our faith, St. Paul, wrote very

personal words about the battle he fought between the spirit and the flesh. In a letter to the Church in Rome, Paul humbly said, *“I do not understand my own actions... For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing”* (Romans 7:15-20).

This side of heaven, even the saints that we look up to as examples of holiness are like you and I, as we read in the 39 Articles, we are all “very far gone from original righteousness,” and of our “own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the spirit.” In other words, *the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak*, and so Jesus warns, *“Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.”* Those two action words, watch and pray, are commands from our Lord, that if we choose to follow, will by the grace of God keep us from falling into temptation.

Therefore, let us watch. Again, to use the inspired words of St. Peter, *“Be sober, be vigilant...”* We’re called to be alert at all times, remaining both physically and spiritually vigilant against temptation, continually aware of the profound struggle between the weakness of our mortal flesh and the strength of the will of the spirit in its pursuit of God. Let us watch, and let us pray, as we prayed fervently in our Collect this morning. Just moments ago this was our lenten petition, “Almighty God, who seest that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves; Keep us both outwardly in our bodies, and inwardly in our souls; that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul...”

This prayer, in which we acknowledge our human weakness and our complete dependence on God’s Divine power, immediately brings to mind the cry of the Canaanite woman in our Gospel lesson whose daughter was *“severely oppressed by a demon”* (Matthew 15:22). Like us, this woman had no power of herself to help herself, and therefore she called out to Jesus to defend her daughter from this a this evil assault. She cried out again and again, and by the grace of God, through the *“great faith”* expressed in her desperate, repeated cry, her daughter was *“made whole from that very hour”* (Matthew 15:28). She was healed entirely - outwardly in her body and inwardly in her soul.

In Holy Scripture, Jesus called the devil “*a murderer from the beginning.*” He told us that Satan is “*a liar and the father of lies*” (John 8:44). Our Lord warned us all about the crafts and assaults of the devil, and so we’re certainly not surprised by the thought that our enemy has countless, proven methods to deceive us and lead us into captivity. However, what does come as a bit of a shock is just how often our good sense, our ability to recognize his schemes rivals that of a baboon. My grandpa used to say, “Fool me once shame on you, fool me twice shame on me.” To be fooled, deceived and led into captivity time and again can feel discouraging, and yet we must not lose heart. Instead, we must loose our grip on anything in this world that is not of God, because it is only when we let go of the things that take us captive, that we can take hold of the One who died to set us free.