

At the turn of this century, there was a trilogy of very popular and now classic science fiction action movies. The first movie came out in 1999, and it was titled *The Matrix*. It was followed by 2 sequels a few years later.

The Matrix could be a source of many different sermons—it leans heavily on both Buddhism and Christianity. It deals with complex themes about the true nature of reality. Maybe someday I'll preach on some of those other things.

But one of the most fascinating things about *The Matrix* is the way human beings interact with computers. Humans have a surgically implanted computer port in the back of their skulls. You can insert a computer cable and be hardwired directly into the computer network.

And one of the most amazing things about this is that you can quickly download information directly into your brain.

Do you want to learn French? Plug in, and after about a 5 second download, you speak French fluently. Want to learn how to do karate or jiu-jitsu? Plug in, quickly download the information, and viola, you're a martial arts master.

That's an amazing shortcut. Because in the real world learning a language, or mastering martial arts, or learning to play an instrument or a sport takes years and years of practice and hard work. There are no quick shortcuts to acquiring complex skills.

It's like the old joke about the tourist in New York City who asks the street musician, "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?"

The musician replies, "Practice man, practice."

There are no shortcuts in acquiring complex skills. It takes time, energy, and effort. Practice man, practice.

In our Gospel lesson today, right after Jesus is baptized, he goes on retreat in the wilderness and is tempted by the devil. And while there are many aspects and nuances to these temptations, at a core level they're all about taking shortcuts.

The first temptation is turning stones into bread. Undoubtedly this is tempting because Jesus is famished. Turn these stones into bread. Satisfy your hunger instantly.

But it's also tempting at another level. One of the key themes of the Gospel of Luke is Jesus' deep compassion for those in need. And so Jesus could end world hunger by turning millions of stones into millions of loaves of bread.

Satisfy your own hunger just by speaking the word. And satisfy everyone else's physical hunger just by speaking the word.

The devil tempts Jesus with instant gratification. You can have exactly what you want when you want it. You've got the power. Use it.

I don't have to spend too long on the parallels for us. In our culture, instant gratification, abusing power, and taking shortcuts for our own personal gain are very common temptations. As 21st century Americans, we are always being tempted with satisfying our physical needs in as quick and convenient a way as possible. So it's helpful to look at Jesus' response. Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"¹

Jesus is quoting scripture here, in this case Deuteronomy. "One does not live by bread alone." Bread is good. Food is good thing.

Bread's important, but bread is not everything. Being fed by right relationship with God is far more important than being fed with earthly food. Using your power the way God wants you to is more important than satisfying your needs for the moment. For the devil, this is Strike 1.

So the devil tries again. He offers Jesus political power. The devil shows Jesus a vision of all the kingdoms of the world. He tells Jesus, 'If you worship me, this will all be yours.'²

In an instant Jesus can have what Alexander the Great, or Napoleon, or Hitler never could attain. He could have total world domination. The power to rule the world. Imagine what that power would mean. The ability to make everyone obey you. The power to make sure that everything is done your way. And in Jesus' case, he could make everyone do things God's way. And yet, to do so requires one small compromise: "Fall down and worship the devil."

That's the temptation for us, too. You can gain power. But to do it you have to compromise your values. We probably won't be offered the world. But what about popularity at school? What about promotion at work? What about building up your portfolio? What kind of tactics, or whose kind of tactics will you use to gain these things?

What's Jesus' response? Unless you're doing things God's way, the price is way too high. Jesus quotes from scripture again,

"It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"³

In other words, the ends don't justify the means. You can't pursue success if it means you have to pitch God's values out the window. For the devil, this is Strike 2.

So the devil tries a third time. He takes Jesus to the top of the Temple wall. It was a high wall build on top of a cliff, and it was a long way down. The devil says, 'If you are the Son of God, jump off. Throw yourself down.'⁴

Imagine the spectacle. You jump off the wall, but angels come to your rescue, and they lower you safely to the ground, all in front of an astonished crowd. The public spectacle

¹ Lk 4:4

² Lk 4:5-7

³ Lk 4:8

⁴ Lk 4:9-11

that proclaims you're something special; you're no ordinary person. The angels go out of their way to protect you.

Imagine what could happen if people could witness Jesus' power. If Jesus throws himself off of the Temple in Jerusalem but doesn't crash, if he's rescued by the angels of God right there in front of them, then all would know that Jesus is the Christ. All would know that Jesus is the Messiah.

Jesus is being offered a huge shortcut. He won't have to preach and teach. He won't have to heal the sick. And most importantly, he won't have to be crucified. Just one jump, the angels swoop in, and his public reputation is secure. No cross. No pain. No death.

So often, we're tempted with shortcuts. The will of God seems hard. Surely there's an easier way. "God, if you really love me, then you'll make things easy on me. God, if you really care for me, you'll let me win the lottery so I won't have to work again. God, if you're really good, remove all the pain from my life so I won't have to struggle."

But again, Jesus answers from scripture. "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."⁵

God is to be trusted, not tested. It's not our place to lay down the law and tell God how things are supposed to be. Strike 3, the devil is out, at least, for the time being.

In the temptations, Jesus again and again is offered shortcuts. It is the equivalent of plugging your brain into the computer matrix and having an almost instantaneous download. Instant gratification. Get what you want immediately. In the words of the classic song by Queen:

*I want it all.
I want it all.
I want it all.
And I want it now.*

And yet Jesus shows us a different way. There aren't easy shortcuts. Yes, the newest person who is baptized is fully Christian from that moment on.

And yet it takes years to grow spiritually. In fact, achieving full spiritual maturity is an almost impossible goal. Even the great saints and heroes of the faith are often the first to admit that they have much to learn about living the Christian life.

We might wish for quicker results, for spiritual shortcuts. But that's not the way God operates.

This week we've been beginning our Lent and Easter Parish Reading Project with readings from the 1st and 2nd chapter of Luke. And these readings may seem a little incongruous. We're starting Lent and simultaneously reading readings that are all about Jesus' conception and birth. These are readings we usually focus on during Advent and Christmas, but not the season of Lent.

⁵ Lk 4:12

We associate these readings with December. Yet they have much to tell us in March. First off, I would remind you that the church celebrates Jesus' incarnation not only on December 25 but on March 25 as well. March 25 is the Feast of the Annunciation of Our Lord Jesus Christ to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Every March we celebrate the Angel Gabriel appearing to Mary and telling her that she is about to conceive a child, exactly 9 months before we celebrate the birth of that child every year.

But more importantly is the way we see Jesus being born in Luke 1 and 2. God comes to live in our midst in the person of Jesus Christ. But God doesn't teleport down from heaven as a fully grown adult. God doesn't come among us with the trappings of power and wealth. God doesn't appear among us with anything that would appear to characterize greatness. Instead God chooses to be born as a helpless infant. What's more, he is born to a lower-middle class couple, in a backwater area. He is not born in a palace. His cradle is an animal trough.

And Jesus doesn't just jump into teaching and ministry instantaneously. He grows up. He develops like a normal human being. He waits 30 years or so until he begins his ministry.

Otherwise, he'd be something of a monster, and not a real human at all. Imagine Jesus sitting up in the cradle and saying, "Mom and Dad, let me tell you a thing or two about the nature of God." No, no, no. He's a regular baby, then a regular toddler, then a regular child.

And even in our reading from Luke tomorrow, when we see the 12-year-old Jesus in the Temple, he's not lecturing the scribes and teachers of scripture, at least not at this point. He's asking good questions. And he's giving good answers to the questions they're asking him. He's a somewhat precocious 12-year-old. But he's a 12-year-old nonetheless.

When God comes to live among us in Jesus, he grows up for 30 years before he figures he's got sufficient spiritual maturity to begin his ministry.

And we want easy answers and instantaneous results? Well, we may want them, but we're unlikely to get them, especially if we're trying to do things according to God's will.

"How do you get to Carnegie Hall?"

"Practice man, practice."

How do you grow spiritually? "Practice man, practice." It's not 2-day Prime Delivery. It's not instant microwaveable results. It's something that takes time.

Time in prayer. Time in scripture reading. Time in partaking of the sacraments. Time in practicing loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself.

Christian spirituality is not a sauce you pour on from a jar. Christian spirituality is something you have to marinate in for your entire life. That's the example we have from Jesus.

Jesus didn't take the shortcuts he was offered. He didn't start at the top. He spent his entire life seeking to do the will of his Father. And on the night before he died, he was still praying, "Not my will, but yours be done."⁶

⁶ Lk 22:42

This Lent, learn from his example. And follow his example. Marinate in God's word. Spend time in prayer. Love and serve others. Worship the Lord your God.

May you have a holy and blessed Lent.