

Lent 1A - March 4-5, 2017

By Fr. Ron Rohlheiser

Antoine Yates lived in New York City and for some inexplicable reason brought home a 2-month-old tiger cub and later an alligator. It's not clear where he found them. But they were with him for two years — in his apartment. What was a little tiger cub, became a 500 pound Bengal tiger monstrosity.

It was inevitable. The police got a call about a "dog" bite and when they got to the 19-story public housing apartment building, they discovered Yates in the lobby with injuries to his right arm and leg. Someone alerted them of the possibility of a "wild animal" at his apartment. A fourth-floor resident complained that urine had seeped through her ceiling from Yates' apartment. When they arrived, the police peered through a hole and saw the huge cat prowling around in the apartment.

To make a long story short, it took a contingent of officers at the door, and some rappelling from the roof to use a dart gun to bring this animal under control. When they entered the apartment, they found the big cat lying atop some newspapers. The alligator was nearby. Both animals were relocated to shelters.

As for Yates, he missed his tiger and alligator, demonstrating that it's possible to be in love with the very things that can kill you. That is what happens to those who entertain temptations in the form of evil thoughts and desires, evil habits and addictions.

(<http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/Northeast/10/04/nyc.tiger/>)

Our Three Temptations

Cosmologists today tell us that the universe has no single center. Its center is everywhere, every place, every planet, every city, every species, and every person. But we already know this.

Faith tells us that what ultimately defines us and gives us our identity and energy is the image and likeness of God in us. We are God's blessed ones, masters of creation, special to God and special within creation.

And we know this long before religion tells it. Deep down, whether we admit it or not, we each nurse the secret of being special. And this is not just ego or narcissism but a congenital imprint inside our very souls. Imprinted in the core of our being is the sense that we are not just accidental, anonymous chips of dust, almost invisible on the evolutionary conveyer-belt, destined to flicker for an instant and then disappear forever. We know we are more. We, literally, feel timelessness, eternity, and immortal meaning inside of ourselves.

In our daily lives that often causes more heartaches than it solves. It is not easy to live out our blessed, special status when, most of the time, everything around us belies that we are special. As much as we experience ourselves as special, we also experience emptiness, anonymity, and our ordinariness. And so it can be easy, in the end, to believe that we aren't special at all, but are precisely small, petty spirits, haunted by over-inflated egos.

We are God's special, blessed sons and daughters, even when our lives seem empty, anonymous, and devoid of any special privileges.

But, while over-inflated egos do cause their share of heartaches, it is still an unhealthy temptation to believe that we are not blessed simply because life finds us one-among-six-billion-others, struggling, and seemingly not special in any way. Faith tells the true story: We are, all of us, made in God's image and likeness, blessed, and our private secret that we are special is in fact the deepest truth.

However that isn't always easy to believe. Life and circumstance often tire us in ways that tempt us to believe its opposite. It happened to Jesus.

He too was tempted, and there was a particular prelude to his vulnerability:

During his baptism, he had heard his Father say: "You are my blessed son, in whom I take delight!" Those words then formed and defined his self-consciousness. Knowing that he was blessed, Jesus could then look out at the world and say: "Blessed are you when you are poor ... and meek ... and persecuted."

But throughout his life Jesus struggled to always believe that. For instance, immediately after his baptism, we are told, the spirit drove him into the desert where he fasted for forty days and forty nights—and afterwards "he was hungry." Obviously what scripture is describing here is not simply physical hunger. Jesus was empty in ways that made him vulnerable to believe that he was not God's blessed child. These were his three temptations:

First, the devil tempted him to this effect: "If you are God's specially blessed one, turn these stones into bread." In essence, the devil's taunt was this: "If you believe that you are God's specially blessed creature, why is your life so empty?" Jesus' reply, "One doesn't live on bread alone!" might be rendered: "I can be empty and still be God's blessed one! Being blessed and special is not dependent upon how full or empty my life is at a given moment!"

The **second** temptation has to do with human glory and its absence. The devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and says: "All of these will be yours if you worship me!" The taunt is: "If you're God's blessed one, how come you're a big, fat nobody? Not famous, not known, anonymous." And Jesus' reply might be worded this way: "I can be a big nobody and still be God's blessed one. Blessedness doesn't depend upon fame, on being a household name!"

The **third** temptation follows the same lines: The devil takes Jesus to the top of the temple and challenges him to throw himself down to make God catch him since, in faith, it is promised that God won't let his blessed one "dash his foot against a stone." Jesus responds that we shouldn't put God to the test. The temptation and how we should resist it are both contained in his reply. In essence, what Jesus says when the devil challenges him to throw himself off the top of the temple to prove his specialness is this: "I'll take the stairs down, just like everyone else!" Our blessedness is not

predicated on having a VIP elevator, or on having any special privileges that set us apart from others. We are God's blessed ones, even when we find ourselves riding the city buses.

And it is good to remember, namely, that we are God's special, blessed sons and daughters, even when our lives seem empty, anonymous, and devoid of any special privileges because then we won't forever be putting God and our restless hearts to the test, demanding more than ordinary life can give us.

Final image comes from William H. Hinson who tells about an amusing article that appeared in his local paper. Over the past several years in Houston, Texas there has been a rash of incidents in which dogs have attacked small children. As a result, the newspapers have run several stories about the attacks some of which have been pretty gruesome. There was one, however, involving a little boy called D.J. that was not so tragic. A reporter asked D.J. how he managed to come away from a recent dog attack unharmed. You can almost picture the serious expression on the little guy's face as he said, "Well, right in the middle of the attack, the Lord spoke to me." "Oh, really," asked the reporter, "And what did God say?" "He said, 'Run, D.J., run!'" the young man reported. [William H. Hinson, *Reshaping the Inner You* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988).]

There may have been times in your life in which God has whispered, "Run, Jim, run!" Or "Run, Sally, Run!" This is a particularly valuable message when we are tempted by the devil.