

"A Holy Lent"

February 14, 2016

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Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." ⁴Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" ⁵Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." ⁸Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" ⁹Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' ¹¹and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" ¹²Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" ¹³When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

There is a story of a little boy named Bobby who desperately wanted a new bicycle. His plan was to save his allowance until he had enough money to purchase the new bike. Each night Bobby asked God to help him save his money. Kneeling beside his bed, one night he prayed, "Dear Lord, please help me save my money for a new bike, and please, Lord, don't let the ice cream truck come down my street again tomorrow."

Here's another story of temptation. There was an enthusiastic but somewhat unscrupulous salesman who was waiting to see the purchasing agent of an engineering firm. The salesman was there to submit his company's bid for a particular job. He couldn't help but notice, however, that a competitor's bid was on the purchasing agent's desk.

Unfortunately, the actual figure was covered by a can of juice. The temptation to see the amount quoted became too much, so the salesman lifted the can. It was at that moment that thousands of little BBs poured out from the bottomless can, and scattered noisily across the desk. He succumbed to the temptation to dishonesty, and the firm knew this person could not be trusted.

Temptations are all around us. Sometimes they come in the form of ice cream trucks and sometimes they come in the form of the chance to cheat to get ahead at work. And they can come in many other forms. But our temptations pale in comparison to those which Jesus faced in our lesson from today.

This is an event recorded in all three synoptic gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all say that Jesus went into the wilderness to be tempted. That was the sole purpose of the journey. Matthew says Jesus was "led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted." Luke says essentially the same thing. Mark is more direct. He says "the Spirit immediately *drove him out* into the wilderness." Bible scholars will tell you that the word used there is really more like "threw" or "hurled." This event happened just after Jesus' baptism. Jesus was baptized, the voice of God says "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" and then the Spirit throws Jesus into the wilderness *to be tempted*. Yes, Jesus understands what it is to be tempted. Hebrews 4 tells us Jesus "in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin."

You see, to be tempted is not a sin. Being tempted to get that dessert that you really don't need (one of my main temptations) or to look at your classmate's paper or whatever temptation you face – just being tempted – is not a sin. We all are tempted – even Jesus. That is not a sin. The sin is in yielding to the temptation, in going beyond temptation to acting in some way, sometimes including acting in your heart. The sin is in moving from being tempted to giving in to the temptation. We must remember that Jesus understands temptation, and will help us in our time of need.

First, let us look at the temptations Jesus faced. The first temptation of Jesus is one we can easily understand. Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights and Luke tells us "he was famished." I think that is rather large understatement – forty days without food and "famished" somehow just doesn't seem to do it justice. The devil tells Jesus, "come on, you can take care of that hunger. Just make these stones turn into bread. What's the harm?" And Jesus responded that bread is not the most important thing in life, the Word of God is. The next two temptations may not be as easy for us to relate to. I'm not too interested in having all the kingdoms of the world. No, thanks. And I don't think I'd be tempted to jump off the roof of the church, trusting angels to not let me get hurt. But you see, those weren't the temptations that *I* face. They were the ones that the devil put before Jesus. The greater

one's power, the greater one's temptations. We have seen this from time to time in some CEOs of big companies and some politicians. They often use all of their power and wealth on the world's temptations, on serving themselves, rather than serving others. We have seen this too many times in wealthy celebrities, from movie stars to athletes. Sometimes these wealthy and powerful people get greedy, as if what they already have is not enough, and take from others. Their power is great and their temptation is greater. Jesus' power was great – He is the Son of God, after all – and so the temptations the devil designed for Him were great. Just jump off that building and show everybody your power, Jesus. That will get you followers. Or, take a bigger shortcut – I'll just give you all of these kingdoms. But this was not the path for Jesus. The path for Jesus was one filled with proving Himself by healing and feeding others, not by just jumping off a building. The path for Jesus was one of teaching, preaching, healing, reaching out to those in need, not just having kingdoms handed to Him. The path for Jesus was not filled with shortcuts; it was filled with an agonizing journey to the cross.

I really like Leonard Sweet's take on this story. He says that we shouldn't look at the temptations of Jesus as challenges to *do* things that He wasn't supposed to do. They were challenges tempting Jesus to *be* someone He was not supposed to be. There's a big difference in those two statements. The biggest temptations we face are not in whether to eat a piece of chocolate cake or whether to run a red light when no one is around. The biggest temptations we face are in pushing us to *be* someone different than who God created us to be. Sweet says the devil wasn't tempting Jesus to take the edge off his hunger by turning stones into bread. He was tempting the Son of God to replace His reliance on God's providence with "fast food." Sweet continues: "The devil wasn't tempting Jesus to jump off the temple roof. He was tempting the Son of God to demand God take action based on the Son's desires and preferences. The devil wasn't tempting Jesus with the power and prestige offered by the kingdoms of the world. He was tempting the Son of God to intentionally orphan himself from the Father."

The devil failed in these tests, not just because Jesus wouldn't *do* a particular action. The devil failed in these test because Jesus had just spent 40 days and nights fasting and meditating on God. The Spirit of God was with Him and in Him and part of Him. And so Jesus would not – will not – be anyone other than who He is, the Son of God.

The temptations we face in life are to be *less* than what God made us to be. Through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we are offered a new covenant relationship with God. God created us all to be God's sons and daughters. That is our true identity. We are the Body of Christ on earth and we are often tempted to be less than that.

Last Wednesday was Ash Wednesday. On that day, Christians around the world – including here – gathered to be reminded of something. Christians are reminded "you are dust and to dust you will return" as the sign of the cross is placed on their forehead in ashes. This begins the period in the church we call Lent. In Lent, we are invited to a period of forty days of self-reflection in preparation for Easter. The Book of Common Worship says the following about Lent: "I invite you, therefore, in the name of Christ, to observe a holy Lent by self-examination and penitence, by prayer and fasting, by works of love, and by reading and meditating on the Word of God." Lent was originally established for new believers, those who were ready to commit to a life as Christians. They were to spend forty days and nights preparing for their baptism. If at the end of the forty days, they still wanted to follow Jesus, they were baptized on Easter Eve as the sun was rising in the East, signaling the new

days dawning in their lives, made possible by the resurrection of Jesus. Later in the church's history, Lent became a time of renewal and recommitment for all Christians, a time for examining our lives in light of the life of Jesus. Some choose to "give up" something for Lent. This is to be a discipline for us, to practice self-control and free our minds of the pursuit of material things. Many people give up some type of food, such as chocolate or alcohol, but sometimes, this is not a true sacrifice. Perhaps something else, like watching TV or movies or social media, would be a better choice. The point, though, is not to be self-torture. The point is not to be focused on the self at all. It is designed for just the opposite. The point is to take the energy that we would have focused on that item or activity and focus that energy on Christ. Perhaps giving up criticism or negativity is a good start. Or you might give up worry or envy or impatience.

Pope Francis last year suggested that we fast from indifference. He wrote "Indifference to our neighbor and to God also represents a real temptation for us Christians. Each year during Lent we need to hear once more the voice of the prophets who cry out and trouble our conscience." Yes, giving up indifference to our neighbor and to God is a wonderful way to tune ourselves in to the life that God has in mind for each of us.

Giving up something is probably a good Lenten discipline for many of us. There is another, opposite, practice. It might go hand in hand with giving up something. *Adding or taking on* something is another Lenten practice. During Lent, you are encouraged to add good things to your life. Reconcile yourself with someone with whom you have a long-standing feud.

Do acts of kindness for strangers. Write letters to old friends. Spend time in nature, meditating on God. Begin the practice of daily Bible reading, if you do not already.

Volunteer your time with organizations that do good for others. Give of your money to worthwhile causes. In the midst of whatever activities you take on, focus on Christ. Think of the sacrifice Jesus made for each of us and let your activities be done for God's glory.

The movie *Chocolat* has many scenes which are good demonstrations of the kind of attitude we should *not* have during Lent, or any other time. One of the main characters comes into a very strictly ruled town and sets up a chocolate shop. The town is run by the mayor, who is deeply disturbed by this new chocolate shop opening up during Lent. One by one, the people of the town sneak in to sample a bit of this wonderful new chocolate. The mayor finds out, and breaks into the store to destroy all of the chocolate. In his fit of destruction, a bit of chocolate lands on his lips. His tongue reaches out to touch the chocolate, and he is overwhelmed by the taste. With that one little bit of chocolate, he is transformed and he begins eating every bit of chocolate in sight, until he passes out. After this, the young priest, who was just as controlled by the mayor as was everyone else – including preaching sermons which the mayor wrote for him – delivers his own sermon which includes this line: "We can't go around measuring our goodness by what we *don't do*, by what we *deny* ourselves, by what we *resist* and who we *exclude*. I think we've got to measure goodness by what we *embrace*, what we *create*, and who we *include*."

Sometimes, Christians are known more for what we *oppose*, than what we are *for*. The point is this – if we choose to give up something during Lent, we are not to do so in a sanctimonious, self-righteous manner. Don't brag about what you are *not* doing. Give up something only if doing so *draws you closer* to Christ. If we take on a new practice during lent, likewise, we are not to do so in a sanctimonious, self-righteous manner. We are to do so only if doing so draws us closer to Christ. Lent is a time of preparation for the holy season of Easter. Whatever helps us draw near to Christ, whether it is adding or

subtracting – *that* is what we should do. We should embrace God, we should embrace God's creation and God's children. We should be immersed in worship and prayer and study. We should do things which help us prepare for the glorious celebration of Easter. So, during these days of Lent, I invite you to resist temptation by being filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. Remember 1 Corinthians 10:13, "God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out." Lean on the power of God during Lent, and always. Give up or take on whatever you need in order to be more in tune with God during this season of Lent. Be fully God's own child. In short, I invite you to the observance of a "Holy Lent." Amen.