

Luke 4:1-13; Deuteronomy 26:1-11
March 10, 2019

4Jesus, 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.

Have you ever fasted? I suppose I have from time to time, like with the youth used to do the empty bowls for instance, remember that? But I can't say I'm a big fan of fasting . I don't like it. Let's face it, I like to eat. You hear people extol the benefits of fasting: they're clear-headed, they feel light on their feet, and strangely, have more energy...I don't really get that. The few times I've done it, I've been grouchy, resentful that I got talked into it and I'm watching the clock to see when it will be over...

So when Erin discovered a show on PBS about this new Keto diet (have you seen this guy?) when she started listening intently as the doctor explains both the benefits of the diet and the benefits of fasting, I knew I was in trouble. If Erin was going to venture into a new eating/fasting plan, the pressure would be placed on me to go along. Maybe not directly but the subtle message would be looming: acknowledging that I could afford to lose a few pounds, or we should get healthy together or I should be supportive by taking an interest...

And that would be at *any* time of year, but this time of year--with Lent, with a wife raised in the Catholic church—I knew there'd be no escaping it.

And so, as of Ash Wednesday, Erin and I started with a fast and are now eating a very healthy albeit very low-calorie/low-carb diet. It's the Keto diet but more restrictive. And, on a more serious note, we had our personal reasons for this that go beyond an expedited weight loss. We have close family members and a very dear friend who are sick and unable to eat without difficulty and in the case of two of them, they are continually hungry and have been losing weight. So our eating plan is both a nod to appreciating our own health and not wanting to take it for granted but also a way to be in solidarity with those we love, when *we* are hungry and are tempted to eat something not in the plan, we remember those who cannot eat and it recalibrates our priorities.

But it's not just about the physiology of dieting or being in solidarity with those we love, during the season of Lent it is also a great time to recalibrate our spiritual selves, and fasting has been long-regarded as a way to set our spiritual life in balance. During Lent we might choose to fast to

be in solidarity with Jesus. As we just read, Jesus, after his baptism, went into the wilderness to be tempted and there he fasted.

So this experience in the wilderness, or really this confrontation, is preceded by the Baptism of Jesus and in order to understand this encounter in the wilderness one must appreciate what had happened prior. At the baptism, Jesus is identified as the Son of God, a voice comes from above, the voice of God the Father and he says, “You are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.” This is important because it is the first time Jesus is identified as the Son of God and the authority of the voice makes this clear to all who are present.

And the scripture then tells us that the Holy Spirit was in him and this is immediately followed in the next chapter where the Holy Spirit then takes Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted; not to pray, not to fast, not to wander, but to be tempted. The connection between Jesus’ identity and his subsequent testing is intentional here.

So, we’ve established *why* he goes into the wilderness—the Spirit lead him there to be tempted-- but why must he be *tempted*? Again, context is important when answering this question. The temptations happen just prior to Jesus beginning his ministry and, in a sense, they prepare him for the hard road ahead.

This is a battle scene, some may see this as spiritual warfare, the holy spirit in one corner with Jesus, the devil coming out from the other corner ready to do battle. And although many might see this as a great combat (and I won’t say they are wrong) that is not going to be my focus this morning. Today my focus is more on the internal battle, for Jesus, and for us, when we are tempted to do what is easy, because it is instantly gratifying or arrogant and self-righteous,

because these things, no matter how bad they may be for us, in the moment, they make us feel good.

As we've already stated, it's hard to fast and Jesus has gone a long time without food. With or without the devil tempting him, wandering about the desert hungry for days, in the heat and the delirium, I can easily imagine stones on the ground beginning to look like loaves of bread. We know he can turn them to bread, the story of the loaves and fishes which happens later tells us that. If he can feed the hungry then, why not feed himself now?

Well, he doesn't change the stones into bread and he doesn't find other food sources in the wilderness because he is *choosing* to fast.

I wondered this week about fasting in the Jewish tradition. Jesus, as a Jew, would have had a Jewish understanding of the practice. And although there are many functions in fasting for the Jewish community at this time: to prepare for a holy day, as an act of penance seeking forgiveness, as a part of prayer to try to get God's attention or sympathy. It seems the reason Jesus fasted was to prepare himself spiritually. To recalibrate, heal and strengthen for the days ahead. It's why Christians might fast during Lent or Jews for Yom Kippur or Muslims for Ramadan. So, when the devil tempts Jesus to turn stones into loaves of bread, Jesus responds, *One cannot live by bread alone*. Jesus knows that his spiritual strength, his self-discipline, being in right relationship with God—all things that can be reaped from fasting—are just as important as replenishing the physical body with food. One cannot live by bread alone, one must seek the spiritual nourishment that comes with fasting and praying, to be right with God.

For the second temptation, the devil leads Jesus up and shows him all the kingdoms of the world, and he says, “all this can be yours if you will worship me.” Jesus, the man, the mortal, has seen what power does to people, how it seduces those who have it, and demoralizes those who don’t. He’s seen the terrifying power of the Roman soldiers, and the abuse of power in the Temple. He knows his ministry will not be easy, he will make many nervous or angry and they will resist him and try to destroy him. How much easier might his days ahead be if he can just make them all bow to him, like the devil says, where there would be no difficulty, no fighting. But of course, there is a price: Jesus must worship the devil.

Jesus responds, “It is written that one shall worship the Lord your God and serve only him.” Being in right relationship with God, a status that’s been strengthened by his time of fasting and praying, has made clear where his loyalty lies, and so he rebuffs the offer of the devil.

Now, I can relate to the first temptation, being hungry, but I don’t know about you, I’ve never been tempted with worldwide domination. And frankly, should it be offered to me, I don’t think I’d want it. This temptation is about power, and with power comes responsibility. And that’s a lot of responsibility. The devil is tempting Jesus with recognition, with adulation, with all people obeying him. That’s what the devil offers Jesus. But Jesus quickly reminds him of the way things really are; we are God’s creatures and we worship God and no one else, not even ourselves. We need to be reminded of where we are in relation to God, remember, it was only in the last 40 days that, during his baptism, God identified Jesus saying, “You are my Son, my beloved. With you I am well pleased.” Jesus doesn’t need dominion over the people of the earth because he is in right relationship to God. And he doesn’t need to have dominion over the people

any more than people need to be dominated by a leader who would demand loyalty, obedience and praise. Because, we can remember our own baptism and know we belong to God.

God says, “you are my child, my beloved.” That’s who we are—and so we worship God and not earthly rulers.

Lastly, and suddenly Jesus finds himself at the top of the great Temple in Jerusalem and the devil dares him to jump, taunting him that God will save him. But Jesus knows that if he jumped, it would be like taking his life into his own hands. It would be the ultimate act of hubris to assume that he or any one of us can call the shots with God and make him perform miracles or tricks like it was a feature performance at a circus. Perhaps the devil was enticing him, saying “Look, Jesus, if you jump off than for certain God’s angel will appear and bear you up so that you don’t get hurt. And everyone will see it and be amazed. You’ll get a load of new followers immediately.” Or it could be that in daring Jesus to jump he was really saying, if you don’t jump than you don’t really trust God, an insidious inversion of the dare. Of course, Jesus trusts God and he doesn’t need to prove his trust to the devil. Jesus responds to this temptation by saying, “It is said, Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

God doesn’t perform on cue like parrot or a circus monkey. The mysterious ways of God are not to be reduced to simple human understanding. Just like the will of God can’t be displayed in the immediacy of the moment, a prayer that is directly answered, a divine act induced by an impulsive and impertinent request or demand. It doesn’t work that way.

This is in part, why we pray. Not because we need immediate remedies applied to our problems, concerns for others. We don’t pray expecting God to act in ways that are immediate and tangible. We pray to strengthen our hearts and minds in the resolve to act as the children of God, to align

our spirits with our calling as Christians in a hurting world. We pray to invite God's presence in our lives and we trust that he will act how and when he wills and not on our demand.

Jesus' baptism told the world who he was—the time in the wilderness was a time to show what kind of Messiah he would be—one of power and domination or one of sacrifice and love and obedience to God. Our baptisms tell us who we are—children of God. Perhaps we can take time this Lent and decide what that means for us. Maybe we'll fast, maybe even lose a few pounds. Maybe we'll pray or read scripture or read the devotions that the church is providing. And these can be our forty days that help us decide again what it means to be a child of God.