

Epworth Chapel on the Green
February 14, 2016
First Sunday in Lent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Psalm 91:9-15
Romans 10:5-13
Luke 4:1-13

The word “Lent” comes from the Old English term *Lengten* which means “spring.” It refers to the lengthening days of early spring when the sun rises higher in the sky and shines longer on the earth.

The period of Lent lasts for forty days, in memory of the forty days in which Christ was tempted in the wilderness (as told to us by Luke this morning). Its origins lie in the fourth century, where it was introduced as a period to prepare new converts to the faith for baptism at Easter.

The spirit of Lent is a spirit of introspection. It is a time for each of us to be inspired and challenged by Jesus’ struggle to resist temptation in the wilderness, and to look deep within our own lives at our own attitudes and behaviors.

Lent is also a time for gracious activity in the world, a time to give to others in compassionate ways. It is a time for seeking tangible ways to express our love for Christ by showing love for our brothers and sisters and those who may be in need.

With that in mind, we transition now to our scripture lessons. Typically, the Gospel lesson on the first Sunday in Lent is the account of Jesus' testing in the wilderness.

I want to explore more closely Luke's version of Jesus' testing by the devil, and then try to extract some lessons for us from his experience.

We begin by noting Satan's great timing. He doesn't approach Jesus after a great miracle, a great healing, or a great sermon. He comes to Jesus when he is alone, hungry, and in the desert. He comes to him as he is about to begin the work his Father has assigned him.

Scripture doesn't give us psychological profiles of its characters, so we can't say for sure what Jesus was feeling and thinking at this point. But if I were a betting man, I'd wager that he's thinking seriously about *how he is going to go about doing what his Father has assigned him to do*. My guess is that he is thinking and praying seriously, not merely about what it means to do God's will, *but what it means to do God's will God's way*.

Satan tries to entice Jesus in three different ways. There is the *personal* ploy to get Jesus to turn stones into bread. There is a *political* ploy to get Jesus to submit to the ruler of the world in order to achieve good for the people of the world. And there is a *religious* dimension, where Jesus is tempted to win

Jerusalem over by coercing faith, and to avoid death by displaying supernatural power.

What lessons might we learn from Jesus' experience to help us in our own lives?

1. Temptation is often seen in terms of an enticement to “fall,” but it can also come in the form of an enticement to “rise.”

That is, temptation sometimes works on us by trying to get us to do that which is good, not just that which is evil.

Take the temptation for Jesus to turn stones to bread. Is turning stones to bread a bad thing? I can assure you that the hungry of the world do not think so.

Or take the temptation for Jesus to exert political control, to compromise himself in order to take political control and achieve good for the people of the world. In a world of dishonest, manipulative political forces, would that be such a bad thing? I can assure you that those who are oppressed would not think so.

And what of the religious aspect of Jesus' testing? Would leaping from the temple be such a bad thing? Those who are longing to see proof of God's power in the world would not think so.

Temptation does not always involve enticement to do evil. Temptation often lures us to do that which is good and will be well spoken of. But it can tempt us to

do good in ways that compromise our integrity, or the integrity of what God is doing in the world. It can lead us down that path where the end justifies the means.

Temptation is not always an enticement to fall. Sometimes it is an enticement to rise, to do good, to do that which is noble and laudable -- but in a way which is not God's way for you.

2. *Temptation can be a sign of strength, not just weakness.* We all know and have experienced times when the enemy comes to us in a moment of weakness, and where we have fallen or given in to temptation in those times.

But the enemy is deceptively smart. He doesn't just attack our weaknesses. He also attacks our strengths. Often we are not tempted to do what we *cannot* do, but rather what is within our power or *ability to do*. Sometimes, the greater our strength in an area of our life, the greater the temptation.

Seen in this light, Jesus' struggle here must have been monumental. He's being tested at the point of his strengths, and being enticed to exploit those strengths in ways that are not God's best plan.

In a similar way, our strengths and special abilities can become a source of temptation for us, because we can become prideful about them. For you see, sin is not so much the absence of good as it is the *distortion* of good. Virtue taken to the extreme becomes a vice. And when we become proud about those areas of our lives where we are strong, we become vulnerable to the attack of the enemy.

3. Scripture is adequate to generate and sustain faith, and to overcome temptation.

Satan is a master at rationalization, especially when tempting us to do good things. He is a master logician, and his arguments are so seductive that it can be hard for the strongest of persons to win.

Notice how cleverly Satan uses Psalm 91 to work on Jesus. Once again, he attacks a strength. He knows the value and place of Scripture in Jesus' life, and so he attacks that strength: "throw yourself off the temple, for he will give his angels charge over you, lest you dash your foot against a stone."

There is nothing more powerful than temptation that entices you to do good, and then rationalizes that good by using Scripture. Shakespeare said: "there is no error so gross but that some sober brow will bless it with a proper text."

But Scripture rightly interpreted stands outside us, and can provide us the compass to keep us pointed in the right direction. Jesus knows what is and what is not the appropriate use of Scripture, and he counters Satan's temptations *with* Scripture.

Brothers and sisters, there is a reason why the Holy Scriptures are read publicly here at Epworth, and why I hold them up in your midst for your attention and response. It's not because we worship a book. It's because we worship the Christ of whom the book speaks, and because the Scriptures have the power to

keep you and sustain you by the grace of God in those times when life seems hell-bent on destroying you.

As we begin our Lenten journey by looking closely at Jesus' struggle, we are reminded today that temptation is not just about doing wrong things. It's also about doing the *right things for the wrong reasons*.

We are reminded that even our strengths are gifts of God's grace, and if our strengths are not humbly given back to God as an act of worship, then the enemy will tempt us at the point of our strength in an effort to turn our virtues into vices.

It's about being reminded that just as the children of Israel were fed by God in the wilderness, so our lives are finally sustained not just by material bread but by the Holy Scriptures which have power to make us strong and to keep us strong in the faith.

As we come to the Table this morning, let us come with a renewed commitment to do God's will in God's way. Let us come desiring not merely to do right things, but to do them for the right reasons -- reasons which require no rationalization.

And let us come with a renewed commitment to allow Scripture to nurture and shape our lives, and less of a desire to lean on our own understanding and wisdom.

As we do, there is grace here to help us as we start our Lenten journey with Jesus, and follow him to his death.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of Holy Spirit. Amen.