

A Holy Lent

1st Sunday of Lent, Year C - Luke 4:1-13

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, February 17, 2013

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Just a few days ago, though it seems a bit longer, many of you made your way here for our observance of Ash Wednesday. After the scripture readings and homily, just before the imposition of ashes at that liturgy, there is a brief paragraph that recounts the development of Lent in the Church and ends with the bidding, "I invite you, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word." To tell you the truth, I'm always a little bothered by that. The part about prayer is good. Fasting and self denial is reasonably do-able. And considering that I am your priest, you will be glad to know that I am more than comfortable reading and meditating on God's holy Word. But that part about self-examination... As you've heard me say before, that's a little tougher for me.

The problem is, I think, that I know from experience that there are pitfalls and traps and... demons waiting in the dark corners of introspection. I guess I'm afraid that in the intensity of self examination, I will find precisely what I don't *want* to find. I'd just as soon *not* go into that wilderness, thank you very much.

Then along comes this morning's Gospel lesson, and we're confronted with the very kind of introspective struggle that the Early Church had in mind when they carved out these forty days before our remembrance of the Lord's Passion. Jesus, newly baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit, is immediately led by the Spirit into the hands of the Devil. Given the choice, most of us would rather the Spirit led us as far *away* from the Devil as possible. But the Devil it is.

In addition to a seemingly outstanding mastery of the Scriptures, this... *creature* apparently has a practical and sensitive mind. "Look," he says to Jesus, "you are a divine being." "You don't have to be hungry like this." "Your father doesn't give stones to those who ask for bread." "For forty years, he rained bread from heaven on your forebearers in this same desert." "Just use a *little bit* of your power; transform these useless stones into fresh and fragrant loaves."

Why not? There's certainly nothing wrong with meeting our basic needs. This neighborly suggestion is the kind of plot sequence you or I might add if *we* were writing the narrative. We like it when things work out the easy way. We like to get something for nothing, or at least for a good bargain. Jesus was hungry, it says so right there in the narration. This is a very *practical* suggestion. But Jesus said no – because bread just wasn't enough.

And it's not enough for us today either. One of the tasks of the introspection of Lent is to look at how we feed our *true* selves. Much of what is advertised as spiritual, social, or personal *bread* has no more real *value* than the average stone. It's easy enough to fill up on all the "spiritual junk food" out there – this new book, that popular blog, the other viral video. But Jesus reminds us that we need to fill ourselves on the one thing that will truly satisfy and fulfill – the Word of God.

The scene changes to a mountain high enough to overlook the whole world. Our devil abandons his unsuccessful pose as learned theologian, to take on the role of some sort of cosmic real estate agent: "All this can be yours," he says. "All you have to do is give *me* the commission." He offers unlimited and uncompromised power, in exchange for just a little bit of allegiance. The allegiance seems minimal, not much, really – a single genuflection, maybe just a polite little Episcopalian bow of the head. Nobody would know up there at the top of the world. What a deal. With that kind of power, Jesus could have

done a great deal of good. But Jesus isn't taking up such an offer – because he knows that the corruption that clings to power is the direct result of the twisted ties formed to achieve it.

Part of the self-examination to which we are called this Lenten season is an honest look at the bargains, the deals, the compromises by which we have made fig-leaf bikinis to conceal the nakedness of our pride, our greed, our craving to be the one in charge of what goes on around us, the one in control. Part of our task is to set aside such lust to power, to realize and live into our dependence on God alone, to surrender ourselves to *his* power and *his* love.

In keeping with tradition, the devil gets a *third* swing at the ball. Another scene change. The devil sets Jesus on the Temple and invites him to take a flying leap. “Nothing will happen to you,” he coos, quoting Scripture once again. “Go ahead, you won't even stub your toe.” “Just... do it.” But the Gospels don't tell us the story of how Jesus descended from the heights of the Temple mount that day on the fluttering, protective wings of angels. The Jesus of the Gospels is one who lived as human in every respect, who walked and talked, who ate and drank, who bled and died... as a human being. The Jesus we know endured every portion of what it really *means* to be human, and yet who, through every moment of triumph *and* trial, suffering *and* joy, remained *faithful* to God's call.

The modern equivalent to this offer is the best sort of Lenten journey, an exhilarating leap in which there is no chance of complications. Whoever takes Jesus' own example seriously, though, will not regard Lent as a journey suitable for those who can't cope with the occasional stubbed toe. No, it is a time when we should *expect* to feel a little... uncomfortable, as we let God prune away those places in our lives that are no longer helpful, no longer useful, no longer growing, to expose the healthy, *living* shoots beneath.

By the time we get to the end of our Lenten journey, we will be reminded again of the price that Jesus paid for the journey *he* undertook, for the choices *he* made, and for the answers *he* gave to the Teller-of-Lies. We will be reminded that he was rejected because he refused to take the devil's offer of comfort and power and safety. We will be reminded that he was beaten and mocked and spit upon because he refused to give the people the kind of messiah they *thought* they wanted. We will remember once again that he died on the *cross*, so that he might become not the Savior we think *we* want, but the Savior that *we need*.

Here at the beginning of our Lenten journey, we remember that the One who would not make bread from stones, became for *us* the broken bread of Eternal Life. We remember that the One who refused to bow to unholy entanglements and dependencies, became for all time the Name at which *every* knee shall bow. We remember that the same One who would not leap down from the Temple's heights, would not come down *even from the cross* to prove that he was the Son of God – and thereby proved beyond a shadow of a doubt... that he was.

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