

A Holy Lent

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

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, February 14, 2016

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.

Yesterday, Jenny and I had to run into the WalMart for a couple of things, never something I do for fun, mind you, but something I *especially* avoid on Saturdays. But yesterday we managed to run into a couple of friends, and were able to do at least a little catching up, which seemed to make the trip a bit less of a chore.

Down the cookie aisle, practically filled from floor to ceiling with the sort of goodies in which I usually indulge with delight, but which I am avoiding for the next few weeks, avoiding *religiously*, if you catch my drift, there was a little boy standing next to the display of one of my favorites – the magical-elf-made fudge-striped-shortbreads. Dressed up against the cold day in his jeans and coat, with just a shock of ginger hair sticking out from beneath the stocking cap pulled down over his head, it was hard to tell, but he looked to be five or six years old. He stood there alternating his glance between his mother, who was choosing something more wholesome from the opposite side of the aisle, and a box of cookies that someone had left opened on the shelf.

Several times he went back and forth. As he looked at the cookies, his hand began to rise in their direction, and then as he looked toward his mother, it fell again to his side. Finally having found whatever she was looking for, the mother looked down in time to see her boy reaching once again in the direction of the treat. “Johnny,” she said, and the boy’s hand snapped more briskly to his side, “are you trying to steal a cookie?” “No,” Johnny replied, stuffing his hand into his coat pocket, and looking up at his mother’s questioning face, “I’m trying *not* to!”

Well... in full disclosure, *I* didn’t see it happen. But it *might* have.

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 the 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.” Then later in the service, as part of the what’s called the Proper Preface, the lead-in to the Eucharistic Prayer that changes with the season, we heard, as we will hear *throughout* Lent, that Jesus “was tempted in every way as we are, yet did not sin.” And perhaps like me, some of you may have said to yourselves, “Yeah, but that was *Jesus*.”

Then along comes this morning’s Gospel lesson, and we get to see exactly what the Proper Preface was talking about, the very kind of introspective struggle that the Early Church had in mind when they carved out these Forty Days. Jesus, newly baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit, is immediately led by the Spirit into the hands of the Adversary.

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, Luke says so right there in the story. 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, perhaps, 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.

One more time, the scene changes. 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 the story of how Jesus descended from 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*... every bit as human as you or me. The Jesus of the Gospels endured every portion of what it really *means* to be human, and yet who, through every moment of triumph *and* trial, *every* moment of suffering *and* joy, remained absolutely *faithful* to his Father’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. I suspect *all* of us wish that there was an easy way through this kind of work. 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, Lent is *meant* to be a time, as I said the other day, 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.

“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.”