

#108
March 1 2020
“Journey to the Cross”
Matthew 4:1-11

4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ And the tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” ⁴ But he answered, “It is written,

“Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple ⁶ and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written,

“He will command his angels concerning you,”
and

“On their hands they will bear you up,
lest you strike your foot against a stone.”

⁷ Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. ⁹ And he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written,

“You shall worship the Lord your God
and him only shall you serve.”

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. When you hear the word “Lent”, what comes to your mind? For many of us, it means self-denial or simply an extra effort at following not fun disciplines. The common expression is that you give up something for Lent. What if we think of the word Lent to mean “Opportunity”, “Path?” or “Journey to the Cross?”

As I was reflecting and looking for guidance for my own Lenten journey, I found a need for companionship. I need support. I want to have a community or friend who is willing to join me and keep me accountable.

I am not ready, yet, for Easter. I do not want to be unprepared. Jesus is alive and we celebrate that fact every Sunday of the year. Easter of course is the

anniversary of the resurrection. To truly sing Alleluias to our risen Lord with joy, we must realize anew what death is and the implications of the crucifixion.

We need Lent. We need time. We need to prepare ourselves emotionally and spiritually.

I have good news and bad news. I will start with the bad news: The only way to know resurrection is to die. I mean you have to die before you die. We will all die, but not all will be resurrected. Only those who die before they die can live in closeness to God now and forevermore.

Jesus said, “Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

I invite you throughout Lent to join me in three ways:

1. Any Sunday between now and Easter bring a cross from home. Put your cross on the altar as a reminder to yourself, and all of us, that we are on a journey to the cross.
2. Join one or more of our Lenten Bible studies or start one.
3. Choose a spiritual discipline listed in the bulletin insert. This week’s challenge is to daily read a passage of Scripture.

Today’s reading comes from the Gospel of Mathew. Just a few verses earlier, as Jesus was baptized, the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased”.

Now we have Jesus led by the same Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted. That seems like a strange agenda for the Spirit of God! I would think that the Spirit of God would have led Jesus *out of* temptation instead of *into* it!

Jesus taught us to pray, “Lead us not into temptation.”

Note, however, that the Spirit does not tempt Jesus, but only leads him into the wilderness—goes with him into the wilderness—like in 23rd Psalm, where God goes with us through the valley of the shadow of death. The tempting is the devil’s business.

A month ago I went to Walmart. At the self-check I had the opportunity to self-check. I did not like what I found inside me. I put the bananas on the scale. After entering the code, the price came to a \$0.00.

At lightning speed, a series of thoughts raced through my head. The first thought was "This is great. I will take it." The second thought was, "That is not right." My third thought was. "Surely, Walmart will survive without my \$2.00."

Next came, "Jolita, it is not your fault. If their computer is messed up, it is their problem." I knew the right thing to do. Still, the excuses assaulted me.

Deep down we know what is right. The more you act on what is right, the more keenly you will hear the voice of God. You get stronger every time you overcome temptations. I did call the Walmart assistant to fix the mistake. She did. The verse I remembered was, "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much".

One of the most effective tools we have to resist temptation is to know the Scriptures. I urge you to read the Bible every day.

Jesus was led by the Spirit into wilderness to be tested. He did not eat for 40 days. He was hungry. It is hard for me to imagine how hungry he was. I skip 2 meals and by dinner time I think I am starving.

Last year, when our small group did a study on fasting, I learned that it makes a big difference to know why we fast. We can find that it is actually very rewarding for reasons beyond weight loss.

Jesus is very hungry. "And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." The challenge comes in the word, "if."

Satan APPEARS when we are most vulnerable. He knows our weaknesses. "If you are the Son of God." What did God say to Jesus at his baptism? "You are my beloved Son; with whom I am well pleased." What does God say to us at our baptism, but that we are children of God?

Satan comes and starts in our heads: If you are God's child, if God loves you, if God is, then prove it.

In essence, the tempter asks, "How do you know you are God's Son?", "If you are really the Son of God, why are you hungry like this?"

Many choose not to believe saying: "God did not prove He is real. I prayed to be shown that He is real and nothing happened." We ask, "Why is God letting this happen to me?"

Satan still works in his old ways. Do you know you are child of God? Like you, I have moments and even days where I have doubts. I believe temptations are not sin. Doubts are not sin. What matters is, how you choose to combat the temptations and make the right choice. Doubts will come. Use them to honestly search for the truth.

Satan tempts Jesus first through food. I can relate to this battle. I want to eat less – especially sugar. I crave it. I cannot win. Along with it comes the feelings of guilt, frustration, shame and failure.

Jesus responded by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, "It is written, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.""

We have good intentions and we do try hard. We are willing and we even understand. The struggle for me, and I believe for many, is that I do not equip myself by being deeply rooted enough in the Bible.

We are so constantly on the run with full schedules that lack of time becomes our favorite excuse. We have no time for the one who gives us time. We have no time here with our Father but we want Him to have time for us when we will have eternity.

By quoting this verse, Jesus is saying: "I know what truly gives life. As much as we love food and eating, it will never satisfy or give you life that will last. Actually if we eat too much it takes our lives from us. Overeating shortens life and makes us sick. What if physical hunger opens a door for spiritual hunger? How about focusing on ways to feed your soul instead of your body?"

Food temptation did not work. The next attack was self-protection.

"Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple⁶ and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written,

“He will command his angels concerning you,’ and “On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.”

Again, notice that word “if.”

Satan also knows the Bible. He quotes 91. So obviously it is not enough to know the Bible to be a Christian. The evil one quoted Scripture trying to get him to apply it in a twisted, self-serving way. We are good at that.

He was saying, "Come on, Jesus. God will take care of you. Jump." The Bible says, if you are Messiah, angels will catch you. Satan says: "Do you really believe God will take care of you? Maybe he won't, if you're not really the Messiah."

We easily manipulate God's promises. Jesus was tempted to put God to the test asking God to prove of His presence and protection. How many times have we said: "God does not love me because of what is happening."? Does God have to give you something so you will believe?

⁷ Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

The most dangerous temptations are the ones that even do not look like temptations. Rather they look like not bad things. Very few people can be tempted with the idea of doing something bad just for the sake of doing something bad. We can all be tempted with the idea of doing something bad in order to get something good.

The end does not justify the means.

We can convince ourselves that something is not all that bad – like me at Walmart. When I see things that I do not need, I – all too frequently – convince myself I need them. God's wants me to be happy and these shoes will make me happy. Are you able to recognize and name your temptations?

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." The Son of God tempted to worship Satan?

Every single one of us fall down and worship someone or something – self, money, hobbies, entertainment and so on. We make priorities. The very first commandment is “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.”

The third temptation is self-exaltation and power. Power over others feeds the ego. We human beings find ourselves unsatisfied and think that if we have admired status and can make people cater to every whim we will have joy.

Satan whispers in our ears: “You need success, accomplishments, pleasures, possessions. Get it now.” We give our time, energy, heart and money to the world and we rob God of His worship. Do you want all now in this world or are you able to trust and invest in the world that is to come?

In the baptismal and church membership liturgy we are asked to renounce the world, the flesh and the devil. Christ Jesus successfully renounces all three of these temptations. Hebrews 4:15 tells us "We have not a high-priest, who cannot have compassion on our infirmities, but one tempted in all things like as we are, yet without sin."

Jesus chose to live a life of suffering obedience to the Father instead of sinful submission to Satan, and in the end all authority in heaven and on earth was given to Him.

Jesus Christ, the victor over all temptations and trial, is alive and walks with us on our journey to the cross and the resurrection.

Would you join us during Lent? Would you give you your time to God and His Word? Would you take it as food to your soul daily? It is hard to live when you eat once per week. May Lent become a time of choosing to do what will please God. Bring a cross next Sunday or any Sunday during the Lent and put it on the altar. May it be a sign of our journey to the cross.