

GETTING CLOSER TO JESUS THIS LENT

1. "When Life Presses in on Us"

Luke 4:1-13

First Sunday in Lent, February 14, 2016

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There is a lot going on this second Sunday of February, 2016. The secular calendar says it is Valentine's Day which carries with it expectations of "Red Roses, a box of Chocolate and a lovely meal" with family and friends that we adore/love/etc. The Catholic Church has several St. Valentines, actual people at least one of whom helped Christian couples wed. So there is a religious element to Valentine's Day.

While the secular calendar says Valentine's Day the liturgical calendar says the first Sunday in Lent. It is a season of the year when we are not to do things to excess—when we are to peer inside ourselves and ponder our Lord more closely. Lent comes from a Latin word meaning to lengthen and may have been referring to the lengthening of daylight after the darker days of winter. Lent is forty days in length, not counting Sundays, and is to remind us of the 40 days that Jesus spend in the wilderness fasting and being tempted by the devil. Some Christians give up a particular food to be in solidarity with Jesus' fasting and ponder scripture more closely to guard against being tempted by our own devils.

Our theme this Lent: "Getting Closer to Jesus this Lent" carries the idea of modeling our lives after our savior. We can't be Jesus but we can try to be like Jesus in as many ways as possible. When life presses in on us, when we have those moments of temptation that today's scripture pictures for us we can think about what Jesus said and where he received the strength to answer? So, leaving the season of Valentine's Day behind for at least a few minutes lets ponder together this story of Jesus and us on the Mt. of Temptation. Three of the four gospels tell the same story. After Jesus' baptism he is either led by or driven by the Spirit into the Wilderness where he spends forty days and nights again either tempted continuously or was tempted at the end of the 40 days. Wow! Anyone here have such an experience? Anyone even wander around in a semi-wilderness for a week trying to find yourself or searching for meaning?

Jesus wandering for 40 days—the use of one of the perfect numbers in the Bible—40 years his ancestors had wandered in the wilderness after leaving Egypt and before entering the Promised Land; in the days of Noah it rained for 40 days and nights; when scourging someone you could give no more than 40 lashes; Goliath (remember him) taunted the soldiers of Saul for 40 days; in the time of Jonah, God gave Nineveh 40 days to repent, Moses was on Mt. Sinai for 40 days and Elijah went on a 40 day journey to get away from Jezebel and so on it goes, 159 times it is used in the Bible. The number came to mean a time of testing, a time of judgment.

So, our 40 days of Lent is a parallel to Jesus' 40 days of temptation. Can we keep our Lenten journey on track as we seek to look closer at and with Jesus into our own personal lives?

Jesus was asked by the devil, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’” Good answer Jesus, touché. Where did he get that answer? Did he make it up? Did he learn it as a child in Sabbath class at synagogue in Nazareth? The words are from the law code in Deut. in the Old Testament. “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.” (Deut. 8:3) Remember Luke is the one who reminds his readers a couple of time that Jesus continued to grow in strength, wisdom and in the word of the Lord.”

Where did Jesus learn his stuff? By studying of course. Some may think, “O Jesus had all of this super knowledge that he was born with or brought with him to earth when he came from heaven on that space ship that dropped him off. No, it didn’t happen that way, Jesus was born the normal way between two humans with a little help from God, but what Jesus learned about his Father and our Father came through study. He was prepared when he went off into the wilderness to meet anyone/anything that would confront him. He also was struggling with exactly what it really means to be about his Father’s business.

That hints at the fact that we need to be prepared as well when roadblocks are placed in front of us, when temptations raise their heads and suggest that we do what we ought not to do.

Lori Hale, a pastor, watched as her almost 4 year old waved goodbye and joined the others on their way down to Children’s Church. The lesson that morning would be on temptation, the story from Luke 4—our story today. The teacher was a very dynamic speaker and storyteller, so the mom wasn’t surprised when later in the day her son asked her, “What do you think about the devil?”

The mother thought of all the answers that she could give but settled on the best parent strategy of asking, “What do you know about the devil.” Then tumbled out these words, “Well ... the devil talked to Jesus. The devil was mean.” She thought does the devil always have to be mean? Could the devil be evil without being mean?

But before she could think any more about this, her son lean in close to her and dropping his voice said: “Suppose you, Dad and I were shopping in a store and you two were in one aisle and I was in another aisle and there was candy.” The devil would say, “You should take some.” She was astonished that her little boy not only knew the story so well but that the part he focused on was the personal tempter and the temptation.

She asked then, “What would you say back to the devil?” A genuine sweet grin lit up his entire face and without hesitation he replied, “Oh! I would say thank you.” (Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 2, page47-48, Lori Hale)

Now, it is not surprising that a 3 year old would miss the point. It is a very good story. But then there are lots of people who miss the point all the time. The point of the story in Luke 4 is not about being tempted or about a personalized devil; the point is about how Jesus answered.

The point is about the choice that Jesus made and the choices that we make day in and day out. The point is to be obedient to God. In Luke's theology scripture is adequate to generate faith and to sustain faith.

In Judith Guest's novel, Ordinary People, one character is a middle-age man going through a classic mid-life crisis. Confused and adrift, every time he overhears a conversation in an elevator or a restaurant that begins, "Now I'm the kind of man or person who ..." he tunes in, hoping to learn some wisdom. But he never does, and he finally admits, "I'm the kind of man who hasn't got the foggiest idea what kind of person I am."

But Jesus knew who he was, knew what kind of a person he was. He was one who knew that life was more than bread alone, one who worshipped the Lord and served only God, one who did not put the Lord to the test. Where did he get this moral courage? Where did he get what it took to withstand the tests of the devil? Week after week in the synagogue, month after month reading the Torah, year after year with the prayers. The helping of the ancient spiritual disciplines.

The devil prefaces his challenge to turn a stone into bread with a taunt that takes a very familiar form: "**If you are** the Chosen One...." Not many of us get heckled for thinking we are "chosen", the tone of that taunt should remind us of outward or inward voices in our lives; "If you are able..." "If you are a real woman or man..." "If you truly care..." "If you are such a good parent..." The root temptation here is almost irresistible. It is not the temptation to do a magic trick, which most of us know we cannot do. It is the temptation to prove our identity, which many of us feel we must.

So here is Jesus, who has just been proclaimed by John the Baptist to be the Messiah. Word is spreading, people are starting to believe that the prophecy has come true, and Jesus himself must have been touched by the emotional turmoil of this historical moment. Then comes the devil saying, "Go ahead and prove it!"

The late Paul Shearer, a Lutheran saint for sure, said in a sermon, "If God really wanted to help us, why in God's name did he send a Savior like Jesus who, when confronted by our needs, just stands there and quotes Scripture? If God is love and God is power, why, in the name of Heaven, does God just stand there?"

So, we hear the devil taunt Jesus with "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread," remember you have heard it before. Out in a similar wilderness the Israelites had asked Moses, "Is God for us or not?" Let's have a little proof that this God is our kind of God. A God who responds to our hungry needs. What good is religion or praying, or you're getting out of bed and being here in church on a cold Sunday if it doesn't yield results in life? "We have forsaken everything and followed you," the disciples said to Jesus. Now, what's in it for us?

When the devil enters the story and has an opportunity to tell his side, this seems to be the main theme. If you are really God, says the devil, make bread, minister to their hunger, because that's really the object of their worship, the real reason they fall on their knees, finger their rosaries, put their dollars in the plate, wear gold crosses around their necks—bread.

Well, who do you say that he is? The heavenly voice, at his baptism, at his transfiguration said that he was the only begotten Son of God. But what do we make of that as he just stands there, quoting scripture, giving us no bread, grasping neither political power to change the world nor even making bread to feed the world? “If you are the Son of God....”

Jesus knew his scriptures well. He was prepared for this confrontation with the devil. He models for us how we are to live our lives. When temptation comes knocking we are prepared to say ... “I do not live by bread alone;” or when asked to fall down and worship the gods of political power or economic might—“Worship the Lord your God and serve only him;” or when you are asked to do some magic in the name of God—“Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

Wow! Jesus passed every temptation. Because Jesus did, you and I have the equipment to know how to face our temptations as well. I know from personal experience that we will not always be successful, but I also know from experience that God will forgive us and allow us to continue to follow Jesus and find that more perfect way.

Temptations never stop. They keep rushing at us. Being a Christian a follower of Jesus doesn't make it any easier—it does give us a model to follow and a way to ask for forgiveness that is real.

Remember how the story ends for Jesus there is Luke 4—“When the devil had finished every test, he departed from Jesus until an opportune time.”