

LENT ONE, YEAR C, MARCH 6, 2022

Today we have the story that is read every year on the first Sunday in Lent about Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. This took place immediately after his baptism and before he started his ministry. Remember at his baptism Jesus heard the bottom line truth about his identity – that he is God’s son and he is beloved. Then we’re told the Spirit led him into the wilderness, where he was to face a series of powerful assaults on that truth about who he is. Jesus had to discern God’s presence in that bleak and lonely wasteland of a desert. He had to trust that he could be both beloved and famished, valued and vulnerable all at the same time. He had to learn that God’s care resided within his flesh-and-blood humanity that could shatter at any moment.

Three times the devil offers Jesus three opportunities to walk away from this essential lesson. The devil, came tempting Jesus to forget his identity and to use his new power for personal comfort and gain, political influence and glory, even free himself from suffering and death. Three times Jesus turned his back on the devil and embraced living a life of compassion as God’s servant.

But these are also temptations that face us as followers of Christ and how we answer them says a lot about who we really are and what our lives are really all about. Do we trust God’s love in the barren places of our lives when our comforts and certainties are holding on by a thread? Or do we only trust in God when our hardships are over.

Jesus’ first temptation is to turn stones into bread. It is tempting to think that the problems of the world will be solved by supplying enough bread for everyone and meeting all the physical needs of people in the world. Jesus was very concerned about the hungry as we must be but Jesus also knew that he had to address the hunger that causes the indifference to the poor and needy. He was very concerned about the spiritual hunger of the people because if people’s spiritual hunger isn’t addressed nothing else will follow. Jesus knew that in order to even begin to feed the hungry that people would need to have a change of heart. That begins by addressing what it is we think we need. What is our soul or spirit hungering for?

There are a lot of things that people hunger for other than food. What is it that you hunger for? Good health? An end to loneliness? Friendship? A solid bank account? A loving family? The temptation is to think only of the things we hunger for or that we believe we deserve. Isn’t that often what our prayers are? We want Jesus to answer all of our needs. We would rather pray to God for the things that will make our life more comfortable than to pray that we will be more Christ like, that we will be led to give more, share more, and be able especially to give so that we can help alleviate the physical hunger in the world.

Jesus’ second temptation was about power and ego. The devil promises him fame, recognition, clout and authority. “It will all be yours,” the devil says. He’s offering Jesus the opportunity to be applauded, admired even envied. I’m certain it was tempting to want the power to just be able to tell people what to do and expect them to obey.

Unfortunately, Christians have an uneasy relationship with power. Church history is littered with the ugly fallout of “Christian” ambition, power, fame, and authority gone awry. But Jesus knew that Love could not be commanded. His revolution would not be a revolution of power. His kind of revolution needed to take place in the hearts of people.

Jesus chose not to act in this controlling way. He chose the way of the suffering servant. So, the question for us is whether we can embrace Jesus's version of significance, a significance borne of humility and surrender. How important is it to us that we're noticed? Praised? Liked? Is our belief in God's love contingent on a definition of success that doesn't come from God at all? Can we trust that God sees us even when the powers-that-be do not? The uncomfortable truth about authentic Christian power is that it resides in weakness. Jesus is lifted up — but he's lifted up on a cross. His power is the power of self-surrender for the sake of love.

The third temptation targets Jesus's vulnerability. "God will command his angels concerning you, to protect you," the devil promises Jesus. "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." The implication is that if we are beloved of God, then God will keep us safe. Safe from physical and emotional harm, safe from frailty and disease, safe from accidents, safe from death.

It's such an enticing lie, because it targets our deepest fears about what it means to be human in a broken, dangerous world. We want so much to believe that we can leverage God's love for us into an impenetrable shield. That we can get God to guarantee us swift and perfect rescues if we just believe hard enough. But no. If the cross teaches us anything, it teaches us that all of God's children still bleed, still ache, still die. We are loved in our vulnerability. Not out of it. We are the children of a God who accompanies us in our suffering, not a God who guarantees us a lifetime of immunity.

We are tempted to make Jesus into the Christ that provides us with the good luck charm so our lives will always go well as long as we believe in him. That is not his way. His way is to be with us. He walks with us, cries with us and shares our joy with us. That's the way Christ chooses to be with us. He can be found often in the midst of our suffering for he not only suffers with us but suffers for us.

The great temptation for us, like Jesus, is to doubt our God-given dignity and power of love, and therefore to misuse it. So Lent is a time which forces us to confront who we really are. You and I are called to wrestle with our own demons, to reaffirm our trust in God, to accept our own call to witness to the Kingdom of God. We are called, as Jesus was, to renounce self-importance in favor of being servants of God. We are called to claim our God-given power of love and to use it well. Like Christ, we have been called by God and given a special identity in baptism. We have been sealed by the Spirit, and marked, as Christ's own forever. In one of our baptismal vows, we ask for three things: that the Spirit will sustain us, so that we may act in accordance as a follower of Christ; that we will receive discerning hearts, so that we may distinguish the distorted from the truth; and that we will have the courage and will to persevere, so that when tempted we can say, I am different. I follow a different path. I follow the path of God's kingdom.

If we learn nothing else during this Lenten Season, let us learn to be the best person that we can possibly be. For that is God's call to us; to be what we have been made in Christ, the people of God whose faithful witness can transform the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.