

INTO THE WILDERNESS
Luke 4:1-13
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, February 26, 2012

The first Sunday in Lent is as good a time as any to talk about the background of this season of prayer and reflection that began on Ash Wednesday and ends on Easter morning.

Lent wasn't officially institutionalized as a liturgical season until after Christianity was legalized by the Roman Empire in the early fourth century, but almost from the start most local congregations had their own Lenten practices in preparation for Christ's passion and resurrection. By the close of the fourth century these Lenten observances of contemplation, fasting and repentance were uniformly practiced throughout the Church during the designated forty days prior to Easter.

Why forty days? It wasn't a random choice. The number 40 is associated with several significant events in both the Old and New Testaments. Moses stayed with God on Mount Sinai for forty days, the Hebrews wandered for forty years in the wilderness and finally, Jesus fasted forty days before he started his public ministry. So, in Bible speak the number 40 is code for a long and serious time of preparation before taking on a great task against great odds. This is particularly true of Jesus' forty days of preparation in the wilderness that would determine the course and scope of his ministry.

Let's first set the context of this important story of Jesus' temptations. Immediately following his baptism Luke reports, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where for forty days he was tempted by the devil." (Luke 4:1-2)

Then immediately following Jesus' stay in the wilderness, Luke goes on to report, "Then Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, returned to Galilee and...He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone." (Luke 4:14-15)

So, the story of Christ's temptations is sandwiched in between the story of his baptism and the beginning of his ministry in Galilee

It's necessary we see this story not as an isolated event but as an essential piece of the ebb and flow of Jesus' life and ministry. At his baptism, Jesus was blessed with clarity and affirmation which quickly gave way to an intense inner struggle. Basically, Jesus was being tempted to give up being the Crucified Christ who'd bring the world what it needed and instead become a counterfeit Christ who'd give the world what it wanted. If Jesus chose the latter, instead of sacrificing himself, Jesus would have exalted himself, coming not to serve, but to be served, not bringing salvation but self glory.

In more ways than one, Jesus' temptations are no different from our own. Like Jesus, we face fundamental choices that will determine the quality and direction of our

lives. And also like Jesus, we face the same adversary who knows how to push the right buttons, knock us off balance and even promise us things that aren't his to give. He knows how to pander to our vanities and prey on our resentments, convincing us we're victims, thereby giving us the right to even old scores. Above all, he knows how to distort our sense of reality and the difference between right and wrong. But we can also learn that Satan can only do these things if we let him because the only power he has over us is the power we give him.

Having said that, let's take a close look at the three temptations Jesus faced and you'll have no trouble recognizing them. Being a shrewd observer of human nature Satan knows how to customize each temptation to fit any particular personality and situation.

The scriptures never reveal when and how Jesus became fully aware of his identity as God's Son. Was it during his adolescence or sometime in his 20's? Who knows? The Gospels never say. But we can be sure by the time of his baptism Jesus had reached full self-awareness, but was maybe not so clear on what he was supposed to do next. That's why immediately after his baptism the Holy Spirit rushed Jesus into the wilderness.

You may recall in the Upper Room Jesus promised his disciples the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, would come to them after Jesus had returned to the Father. Why would Jesus refer to the Holy Spirit as "the Comforter" unless Jesus himself experienced the comfort of the Spirit in the wilderness? I think there's something very comforting about this image of Jesus being enveloped by the comforting presence of God, almost as if he was being whisked off to a secure place to be loved and empowered before going out into the world.

So even though Jesus was being tempted he wasn't alone. The Spirit stayed with Jesus loving him to resist, reminding him the only power Satan has is the power we give him.

So what practical lesson can we take from this story to apply to our own life situations the next time we're being tempted? Simply this, temptation is successfully resisted only when we submit to God.

Let's take a closer look at these three temptations that target our three greatest weaknesses, our cravings for security, control and attention.

First, our craving for security: "Turn these stones into bread." Satan commanded this not only because Jesus was hungry but to seduce him into using his power to provide security for the masses. Again, remember the context. Jesus was between his baptism and the start of his public ministry. Would Jesus submit to his Father's will, become the suffering Messiah, and usher in the Kingdom not of this world or would Jesus give into temptation and take the easy path to power and glory? The Roman emperors kept the people happy by giving them bread and circuses to divert them from their hardships. "Take your cue from Caesar, Jesus, give the people dinner and a show. Be the Messiah they're looking for, a powerful leader who can promise them everything.

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

Undaunted, Satan led Jesus up and in an instant flashed before him a vision of all the kingdoms of the world. He lied by saying he was given authority over them and he’d give it all to Jesus if only he’d bow down and worship him. “Jesus, why die for the sins of the world when you could rule the world with impunity? You’d be in control with absolute power!”

Again Jesus resisted. “It is written, Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.”

Finally, Satan took Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple. “Jump down, Jesus, right into the middle of the busiest place in Jerusalem where the multitudes will see angels from heaven slowly lower you down onto the pavement. You’ll become an instant celebrity, a superstar, the center of attention! The people will obey and fear you because they’ll know you’re from God.”

Jesus said, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” After his third strike Satan left Jesus biding his time for a more opportune time.

So you see, Jesus faced the same temptations we do when it comes to our need for security. Aren’t we tempted to play it safe even if it means lying and cheating a little or maybe even letting someone else take the fall so we don’t have to? Aren’t we so afraid of losing what we have we’re reluctant to be generous in our giving of time, energy and treasure, even when someone else is depending on you? Isn’t it also true that Jesus said if you try to save your life you’ll lose it, but if you’re willing to lose your life you’ll save it?

Aren’t we also tempted to have absolute control over everyone and everything? Perhaps you’ve encountered a control freak in your life. Maybe you’re a control freak and you’re tempted to do whatever it takes to control people, situations and things. “All this has been given to me and I can give it to anyone I choose.” Believing that is delusional. I mean really, do you think you have the power to control all the other six billion people on the planet?

Aren’t you also tempted to be the center of attention, to get the credit and recognition you deserve, and don’t you get all out of sorts when someone else is lionized and catered to by others leaving you in the dust, underappreciated and even worse ignored.

Satan tempts us to jump down and make a splash, grab the limelight, be the center of attention, get the celebrity and praise you deserve or you wished you deserved.

We all have fragile egos, we’re easily hurt and insulted and we all, in one way or another, crave attention. Maybe you can remember a time when you embarrassed yourself by drawing attention to yourself because you just want to be somebody who counts, without realizing that you are well known and your gifts, talents and contributions are already recognized, by God. That’s why Jesus said, “Do not put the Lord your God to

the test.” You don’t have to force God’s hand because God’s already holding you in his hands. Who could ask for anything more?

Did you ever wonder why Jesus never gave into temptation? It wasn’t because his divinity gave him immunity from sin, but Jesus did have a motivation stronger than any of us. You see, Jesus knew if he gave into temptation even once, he’d become a sinner and effectively disqualify himself to die for the sins of the world. Only one who was pure and blameless could offer himself up on the cross. Jesus had to remain the spotless Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world. That was the burden he carried and never set down.

Be aware of all this as you begin your journey into Lent. But also pray for the growing awareness of your responsibility to allow yourself, your old sinful self, to be crucified with Christ so your sins can die and be replaced with the desire to sin no more. Also be aware that just as Jesus submitted to the Holy Spirit in order to stand his ground, the Holy Spirit is waiting and ready to strengthen and comfort you so the next time you’re being tested you will stand your ground and give God your best.

One more thing to remember, the 40 days ahead are given us to be a time of preparation for the rest of your life. Be in prayer, search the scriptures, let the Spirit lead you into the lives of others so Christ’s ministry of reconciliation to the world can continue through you as you follow in Jesus’ footsteps, loving and serving the least of these God sends your way every day.