

First Sunday in Lent, February 21, 2010

Luke 4: 1-13

Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

The story of Jesus in the wilderness, fasting for 40 days, undergoing temptation, is the story that shapes the season of Lent. We began our observance of Lent on Ash Wednesday, with a solemn service of confession and repentance, of asking God's forgiveness, seeking renewal for our lives. During Lent, Christians are encouraged to adopt a Lenten discipline, such as fasting, prayer, and almsgiving, to strengthen our relationship with God, and to recall Christ's sacrifice for us.

Our church school children have decorated boxes to place 2 cents for each mealtime. Their offerings will be collected and donated to the ELCA Disaster Relief for Haiti. They are practicing almsgiving.

Our older youth are being invited to participate this spring in a 30 hour famine at church. So they will be practicing fasting.

If you have not taken up a Lenten discipline these 40 days, there is one suggested right in our scripture readings. The Apostle Paul wrote, "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart". My question for you today is, "Do you keep God's word near you?" What if I asked everyone to bring their bibles to church next Sunday? What would your bible look like? Does it look like my tattered and well loved bible? Or does it look like it came right off the shelf at the bookstore? Maybe you are here today, and you don't have a bible yet. You're here because you have questions and you've come to learn more about God and Jesus but you're just checking things out. Come see me after worship, so you can receive a Bible.

I don't say this to embarrass anyone. I'm not going to ask you to bring in your bibles next week, but I do want you to go home today and find your bible, open it and read your bible. Because if it is true that you have not been keeping God's word near to you, then you've got to start asking yourself what words are near you instead, filling your heart and your mind?

Let's circle back to the Gospel story today. Jesus was in the wilderness. That's a place where even the basic supports of food and shelter are absent.

Jesus was sent there by the Holy Spirit, and the sense is conveyed that Jesus was being prepared for his mission. He had heard a voice from heaven speak as he was baptized and came out of the waters of the Jordan River, "This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased". Look at the beginning of the Gospel reading- it refers to Jesus at the Jordan. Surely as he entered into the wilderness, his Heavenly Father's words were near in his thoughts. No doubt Jesus was reflecting on that message.

We do not have to go to the Sinai to be in the wilderness. Wilderness can be a quiet space, a time apart from others, or it can be out in nature, on a lake. If you have spent time in the wilderness, you know that empty space has a way of drawing ourselves out, to look at ourselves, to reflect. The wilderness is a good place to figure out who you are and what your life means.

Jesus spending 40 days in the wilderness reminds us of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula for 40 years. God used that time to establish their identity as His chosen people, to define His relationship with them, to build total trust and dependence. God fed them with manna; and provided water from the rock. He provided commandments so they would know how to live according to the purposes he created them.

Even though they had fled from Pharaoh yet in the wilderness they complained, and rebelled, and wished at times for the comforts they'd left back in Egypt. Taking away familiar supports can cause you to complain, until you realize you don't need all that baggage.

Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days; and at the end of that time, his encounter with the devil shows Jesus clearly came out knowing who he was and the purpose for his life! ***Knowing who we are and the purpose for our lives will enable us to live our true lives as Christians.*** What the devil attempts to steal is Jesus' identity and purpose for his life. And he fails, even when Jesus is at his weakest point, after forty days of self denial.

We've heard this story probably many times and usually the focus is on the specific temptations. We can see some new things if we look at the temptation story as a story of defining Jesus' identity and ours. Our identity and purpose will define how we live every day of our lives, every choice we make, influence all our decisions and help us fight temptation.

Look at the three temptations: one Bible commentator characterizes these temptations as the devil tempting Jesus to be magical, powerful and spectacular.

The devil wants Jesus to perform magic, and turn stones into bread. Instead, later, Jesus will miraculously feed 5,000 people; even then he asks them to not focus on the meal so much as himself as **THE BREAD THAT COMES FROM HEAVEN**. Jesus says, "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never thirst."

The second temptation isn't about ruling over all the kingdoms of the world. It's about how Jesus will wield the power he's been given. If Jesus would pledge allegiance to the devil as a precondition to being given authority over the kingdoms of the world, Jesus would be agreeing to wield power in devilish ways. Domination, enslavement, the way the world wields power.

Instead, Jesus will ride into Jerusalem on a donkey, hailed as Savior, because he lifts up the lowly, the poor, the widow and the oppressed. He will give away his power to the powerless.

The devil wants Jesus to be spectacular. Throw yourself off of this pinnacle and the angels will catch you. Says so right here in Psalm 91. Well, it doesn't say that. Psalm 91 is about God's protection of someone under attack. It's a situation requiring God's defense and protection, not daring God to help out on some stunt. The devil twists scripture's meaning, but oh so cleverly.

God's word is near to Jesus, on his lips. He uses the book of Deuteronomy to beat back every temptation the devil throws at him.

How does this translate as a teaching for our daily lives? The process of letting go may cause us to complain like the Israelites had. Our minds are very persuasive at telling us we can't survive without this possession or that habit.

Last fall I looked at a room full of Confirmation Parents and I asked them: what are you afraid of for your son or daughter? And the uniform reply: Everything! How can they be prepared to reject false messages, to not begin to rely on things that pretend to support our life, to avoid the distractions? What does it mean to be magical? I think of cosmetics and obsession with appearances, and surgery to magically appear to be something we aren't so we can get attention or affection or popularity. What is beauty? Or maybe in the business world it's the magical shortcuts which really were a ponzi scheme and cooked books? What is true wealth?

To be powerful. We all want to be in control. Yet instead we are called to become a vessel for God's power to flow through us, to others.

With reality TV, trying to be spectacular is a national obsession – more likely ending up as a spectacle. What is the motivation? Narcissism. There's no worth unless the camera is on them as they and their rivals go to pieces. We encourage this twisted behavior.

Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest and well known author wrote a reflection called, "Settling for Less"

That hollowness we sometimes feel is not a sign of something gone wrong.

It is the holy of holies inside of us, the uncluttered throne room of the Lord our God. Nothing on this earth can fill it, but that does not stop us from trying.

Whenever we start feeling too empty inside, we stick our pacifiers into our mouths and suck for all we are worth. They do not nourish us, but at least they plug the hole."

In the end, Jesus refuses to let the devil shape his life. Jesus will only allow his life and his identity by the words of His Heavenly Father. For Jesus, being magical, powerful and spectacular is worth nothing. Instead he trusts in God's words, "You are my Son, the Beloved."

If we want true safety for us and our children, it will come down to what we believe about our identity and our purpose in life. We must keep God's word near us. If we trust God and know who he created us to be, know His purpose for us, we are prepared to face the devil when we are tempted to be his person instead. We are God's beloved: why settle for anything less? Amen.