

Deuteronomy 26:1-11  
Psalm 91:1-2,9-16  
Romans 10:8b-13  
Luke 4:1-13

Lent 1C  
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island  
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When a person thinks she's being called to Holy Orders, she is invited to do a vast amount of interior work... really just a vast amount of work, period. When I think back on those seven years I spent discerning my call and preparing for priesthood, one of the questions I was required to respond to stands out more than any other. It was a question Jesus asked Peter: *"But who do you say that I am?"* Peter answered him, *"You are the Messiah of God."*<sup>1</sup> I spent a long time trying to figure out my answer – I probably could have copied Peter, but the work of figuring out who Jesus is for me was worth doing. So after a lot of prayer and pondering I answered something like this: "If am hungry, Jesus is bread. If I am thirsty, Jesus is living water. If I am afraid, Jesus is my stronghold. If I am incapable, Jesus is able. Jesus is the one who saves me from thinking I am my own savior. Jesus is the only one, the only thing that fills me up and soothes my soul. Jesus is everything to me."

Today's gospel passage got me thinking back to that time when I had to articulate who Jesus is for me and to the stunning recognition that he really is everything I need, that I can turn to him for anything. Now don't misunderstand me - that doesn't mean I always remember to ask or that I'm even willing to ask. But it does mean I know I can. So when I think about Jesus in the desert, fasting for forty days – forty days! being tempted with bread when he was famished, tempted with power in the face of utter powerlessness, tempted with safety and security when everything was coming completely undone – well, I realize that while he will give me bread and water and strength, he wouldn't take those things for himself. And the reason he wouldn't take them was because it wasn't the Father who was offering them. It was Satan. It was Satan offering Jesus everything he needed to escape the wilderness he was in. This wasn't the only time Jesus was in a situation he didn't want to be in. In the wilderness, in Gethsemane, at the last Supper, on the cross... the temptation to give in must have been overwhelming. But he'd been driven in to the wilderness by the Holy Spirit and he wasn't going to leave until it was time.

I don't think he was counting days till he got to forty – in the Bible, forty doesn't always mean forty. Sometimes forty just means a really, really long time. Jesus stayed there all that time, being tempted by the devil until the devil knew he'd been bested. But to endure the wilderness, to fast 40 days, AND to be constantly tempted by the devil the whole time? It's unimaginable for us. All of our human desires for safety, security, power, control, esteem and affection, come rushing in. IT WAS THE WILDERNESS – it wasn't safe or secure, Jesus had totally given over to the Spirit, gave over all the power and control he could have invoked just as he did when he was on the cross. Satan offered him the admiration of all the kingdoms of the world if only Jesus would worship him. Safety, security, power, control, affection and esteem are very real

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 9:20

temptations for us – I think they were for Jesus too. But what interests me so much more than WHAT we're tempted to do or to say or to feel, is the really tricky nature of temptation itself.

For some of us, Lent is a time to give up one or another of life's little pleasures, be it chocolate or coffee or television or Facebook. We spend forty days and forty nights fighting the temptation to get on Facebook and see what we're missing because we're afraid of missing out! Or we spend forty days and forty nights – well, mostly forty nights - opening the cupboard door where we've "hidden" the dark chocolate and arguing with ourselves about just having one piece, just tonight, just because it's been a long and hard day and tomorrow will be a different day and tomorrow I won't eat chocolate because this one day really won't matter because there are thirty nine other days because surely not eating chocolate for thirty nine days is more than enough self-denial, because, because, because.

The world is full of temptations and I don't actually think Lent is best experienced by setting ourselves up to be tempted by the desire to muscle ourselves in to behaving. When the struggle is demanding and difficult and distracting, how does that bring us closer to God? When we're feeling like miserable failures, how does that bring us closer to God? I am not saying discipleship doesn't include discipline, spiritual or otherwise, it certainly does. But when we take on Lenten practices only for the sake of discipline and not for the sake of eliminating the things that distract us from who and whose we are, well... I won't say it's wrong, but I'm not sure it brings us closer to God. The reason we give up or take on in Lent is not to determine whether or not we can overpower – even with God's help – our temptations. The reason we take on or give up something in Lent is to bring us closer to God.

If Lent has been a drudgery or a disaster for you in years past, then good for you for being here today. With all the misery the church has associated with Lent, it's a wonder people are still willing to engage it. But I love Lent and I think, if you can allow yourself the gift of a little uncertainty, if you decide not to give in to the temptation to feel like a failure before you've even begun, you might come to love Lent too.

What are the strong temptations in your life? Are you tempted to try to control things or people? Are you tempted to please people so they will like you? Are you tempted to despair? Are you tempted to road rage, to tell white lies, to talk about people behind their backs? What tempts you? And why? And what does God want to speak into that temptation? What would happen if you could get underneath the thing that you're tempted to and begin to understand why that particular temptation belongs to you? What would happen if you sat down to say your prayers and began by asking Jesus to sit with you and tell you he loves you?

Over and over Satan said to Jesus: if you do this, then you'll get that. It's a good trick. Churches use it: If you give a lot of money, God will bless you with a lot. If you believe and behave according to everything this church espouses, then God will love you. Parents use it too: If you do your chores, then you will get an allowance. If you do your homework, then you can go to

the game. It's all the same thing really. The truth is very different from those if/then propositions whether it's us or the devil talking.

The Letter of James says it this way: Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above<sup>2</sup>. So what if we reframed: *If you give a lot of money, God will bless you with a lot*, to say: *If you give sacrificially, you will reap the spiritual benefit of having recognized that God gives everything and to give sacrificially is yet another gift God gives to us*.

The First Letter of John says this: Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us...God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.<sup>3</sup> So what if we reframed: *If you believe and behave according to everything this church espouses, then God will love you*, to say *There is nothing you can do to make God love you and there is nothing you can do to make God not love you. God IS love*.

The Apostle Paul says this: For this is not for the ease of others and for your affliction, but by way of equality-- at this present time your abundance being a supply for their need, so that their abundance also may become a supply for your need, that there may be equality...<sup>4</sup> So what if we reframed: *If you do your chores, then you will get an allowance* to say: *We do chores in our home because we live in a loving family and love means we care for one another and we share the load. AND You get an allowance because it's important for you to learn how to share, save and spend the money given in to your care*.

Do you see? Life in God isn't about if/then propositions. Life in God works by returning to the Word of God. Now we know the devil can quote scripture – we heard him do it this morning. There is no shortage of people who will use scripture to get what they want. But that's not what Jesus did. Jesus used scripture as his strength and along with prayer, as his connection to the Father. The Word was very near to him - he had it at his disposal and through it he was given everything he needed to do what he had to do. The Word was on his lips and in his heart - it was very near. So maybe, instead of fighting with ourselves and being tempted to use force to overpower our temptations, it would be a good idea to read more scripture during Lent so that the Word would be very near to us too. So it would be on our lips and in our hearts, at the ready when are tempted to make decisions that draw us away from God, tempted to do something that won't be good for us, tempted to fall into despair, tempted to believe in a God who demands we leave the chocolate in the cupboard instead of a God who loves us and wants us to be healthy and happy and generous and loving.

Maybe in this Lenten season we can even stop asking what God wants FROM us and learn to ask ... *Loving God, what do you want FOR me?* Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> James 1:17

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 4:8, 16

<sup>4</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:13,14