

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

Lent 1C  
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island  
March 9, 2025  
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### Noticing

When I was driving to church on Thursday, I noticed that the things I see each morning looked different to me! The sky was especially gloriously blue, the water especially glassy, the birds especially abundant, and I took notice in a way I don't always notice. I'm not sure how the Holy Spirit nudges you, but when fully formed thoughts come to me, seemingly out of nowhere, I know that is the work of the Spirit. And what the Spirit said loud and clear to me on that second day of Lent, was that my Lenten practice was to be noticing. Noticing in a way that takes time and attention and purpose. So each night I write some of the things I've noticed, whether they be birds, or someone who seemed sad or my breath or a particular feeling. And while it may seem that I got off easy with my Lenten practice this year, I don't think it's true. I'm called to notice how my day goes when I don't pray first and often. I'm called to notice how I impact people by the way I do my work. I'm called to notice what happens when I eat my lunch mindlessly at my desk. Noticing is a lot of work.

I wonder what Jesus noticed when he was in the desert, fasting for forty days, all the while being tempted with bread when he was famished, power in the face of utter powerlessness, safety and security when everything was coming completely undone. I'm guessing he noticed he was really hungry, and that he could escape the wilderness in a heartbeat if he'd wanted to. Satan offered Jesus everything he needed to escape the wilderness he was in, but Jesus wouldn't take any of it. That's mostly what we think about with this part of Jesus' story – that he was brave and strong and true and that he never faltered. I am not like Jesus that way, but rather than criticizing myself for that, I'm noticing the questions that come to mind. Where are the vast empty places in my life? What do I use, or do, to escape my wildernesses, and why do I try to escape them? What might happen if I simply sat in my wilderness places and noticed?

While I'd like to be able to answer those questions with you today, I can't. These are the questions I'll be contemplating this Lenten season. We all find ourselves in the wilderness at some time or another, whether it be the wilderness of loneliness, or guilt, or illness, or the suffering of people we love. Learning to stay rather than escape or pretend it isn't happening, is something Jesus is teaching about today. 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. Even in our own small ways, we know this.

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 screen time. We spend forty days and forty nights fighting the temptation to get on Facebook because we can't bear 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.

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 fighting with ourselves bring us closer to God? How does feeling like a miserable failure 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 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 to take on or give up something in Lent is to come 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 or to road rage, to tell white lies or 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 tempts you and begin to understand why that particular temptation belongs to you?

On the surface, the temptations Jesus experienced looked like bread and power and invincibility. But the real temptation, the one that would have lost him everything, was the temptation to deny his identity as God's beloved Son. It's true for us too. It's not that the particulars of his temptations don't matter, they do. The first temptation goes straight to the gut. "You are starving. If you really are the Son of God, surely you can turn that stone into a loaf of bread." And surely, he could have. But he didn't, because turning that stone into a loaf of bread for his own personal satisfaction is not who or how Jesus is. People all over the world are starving and they can't turn stones into bread. Jesus loves, bonds and identifies with the poorest of the poor, the most outcast of all outcasts, the most oppressed of the oppressed. For Jesus to have turned that

stone into bread would have denied everything about who he really was – God incarnate, fully human. Like people who give things up in Lent – chocolate, screentime, coffee – and notice their want for those things, Jesus sat with his hunger. Just as every precious, starving human on the planet must endure their hunger, Jesus endured his. God doesn't check out and do what only God can do. God, in the form of the fully human Jesus, made the only choice hungry people can make. He hungered. *"It is written,"* he said, *"One does not live by bread alone."*<sup>1</sup>

Then Satan showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, offering all the power, prestige, security, and lordship, that went with them. Jesus could have had it all, if only he would worship Satan. But Jesus knew that the sort of power Satan offered up, was no power at all. For Jesus, power resides in vulnerability, in being last rather than first, in surrendering oneself for the sake of love. God, in the form of the fully human Jesus, made the only choice any powerless person can make. He turned to the God who cares equally for all people rather than Satan who cares for self, alone. *"It is written,"* Jesus said, *"Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."*<sup>2</sup>

And at the last, Satan did his worst. In the first two temptations, only Jesus quotes scripture. But in the last temptation, Satan quoted scripture to Jesus. Using God's promises against Jesus, Satan said, *"Jump off the pinnacle of the temple. [God] will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways."*<sup>3</sup> What's important to notice here is just how sneaky pure, unadulterated evil can be. Using God to turn one away from God is unconscionable. I know this. And the first someone used God and quoted scripture at me to support a position so antithetical to anything Jesus ever would have upheld, I was terrified. But that's what evil does – it uses false notions of God to dispel all that is Godly. Satan told Jesus (and tells us) that if God really loved him, God would save him even if he jumped off the pinnacle of the temple. That may have been true, but that's not the point. People are vulnerable. We can't jump off the roof and expect to land unscathed. Our God doesn't promise to protect us against everything or even anything. Our God promises to stay with us, no matter what. So once again, Jesus, fully human, refused to do the things mere mortals cannot do. Amidst all the temptations, Jesus never, ever, invoked any power a vulnerable, tender human couldn't invoke.

Over and over Satan said to Jesus: if you do this, then you'll get that. It's a good trick. But life in God isn't about if/then propositions. Life in God works by returning to the Word of God. We know Satan can quote scripture – we heard it this morning. There are plenty of people who use scripture to get what they want, rather than what God wants. But that isn't 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 4:4

<sup>2</sup> Luke 4:8

<sup>3</sup> Luke 4:10

So maybe, instead of fighting with ourselves and being tempted to use force to overpower our temptations, it might be a good idea to read more scripture 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 we 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 notice the many choices God offers us, notice the many gifts God offers us, notice the many connections God offers us, just as we notice the many temptations we grapple with every day. Maybe we can even stop asking the question "What do you want from me, God" and ask instead ... Loving God, what do you want FOR me? Amen.