

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

We're in the season of Lent, we observe it every year for forty days. We all know Lent leads us to Holy Week, then to Easter. For some folks it's just something they've always done, like getting a flu shot every year, it must be good for us, they think, because pastor always seems to make a big deal of it. For some Lent is a good excuse to stop eating red meat or cookies, or give up beer for a while, to outsiders it looks like a diet.

But it's Jesus' wilderness sojourn that inspires this forty-day season. Jesus has just been baptized in the Jordan, the Spirit has descended on him, and God spoke from heaven: "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased!" Jesus, now about 30 years old, is beginning his ministry, he's seemingly come out of nowhere, and now is led by the Spirit into the wilderness, into nowhere. Led into nowhere to do what?

Jesus comes face-to-face with temptation, with the power of the tempter. You and I have repeatedly faced temptation, you and I have upon occasion, given in to temptation. We're all vulnerable to it, though our temptations may differ, and what tempts us may change. Sometimes temptations come as the noblest of intentions, that's what Jesus faced. Temptations worthy of the Son of God. Temptations that could prey upon his goodness, and we learn something about Jesus' heart.

Tempted by the devil, although not in the form of a serpent, and Jesus essentially hears what sounds to us like the voice of good. Take good care of yourself, you can save the world, just prove your faith. None of these things seem self-destructive, on the face of things they seem sensible.

Usually when you or I are tempted to do something, it's something we know we shouldn't do, the kind of stuff we certainly wouldn't want our kids or grandkids to do. A lonely spouse who has an attractive co-worker, a convenient bar in a hotel room. Something we know is wrong, but is awfully appealing all the same. Believers who observe the season of Lent wrestle with these destructive forms, but now the idea is to recognize these things because often we don't see them as temptations until we see them in the rearview mirror. And the most dangerous are the temptations that sound like good, that sound like God.

Now Jesus is a good man, literally a good man, strength, integrity, moral character, yet he is tempted. And what our gospel story tells us today is that it's not strength, integrity, or moral character that helps us resist temptation. When we think we have enough strength, integrity, or moral character to be exempt from the lure of temptation, then it's just a matter of time before we give in. Led by our own wisdom, our own good intentions, our own desires to see good done, and even take a shortcut or two to get there, then whatever the temptation, it will fit us like a custom-made glove.

So what then, is the answer? It's not making a good decision based on the pros and cons, instead it is submitting to God, obedience to God. Again and again and again. Jesus tells the tempter "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him.'" "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Jesus' stomach might disagree about the bread, and the power to reorder the world and do good, look tempting. And the man who will be tested even unto death, certainly doesn't look like the Son of God, the King of Kings. But he is the real thing, and what was said at his baptism is refined in the wilderness. This isn't the last of Jesus' temptations though, he'll go through variations yet again, all so very tempting.

Peter the rock on which Jesus will build his church wants to save Jesus from an undeserved harsh death and his is the voice of the tempter. When dying on the cross he hears variations of "come down from the cross and we'll believe." And then, as now, obedience to God the Father delivers him. The one who teaches with authority is under the authority of the Father who sent him.

And here we are in the season of Lent, it's not strength training for our faith or spiritual muscle. It's about obedience, reliance, dependence upon God, that not every door is the will of God. Lent is about being led to the wilderness where we recognize our hungers, fears, our dreams, are all trying to shout out the voice of God.

Soon we'll follow Jesus into a garden where his desire that his cup be taken from him gives way to his prayer "Yet not what I want, but what you want." Obedience to God. Perhaps during this season of Lent we will recognize that the tempter often speaks to us in our own voice, perhaps we will realize that there are places we would never go if left to our own devices. We, you and I, are saved by grace through faith, faith in Christ crucified, who did what we cannot do. But during our sojourn in the wilderness, may God grant us by this faith that comes by his grace to obey him all the more fully in the time to come, to take the narrow gate, the road less traveled. AMEN