

*Same Old Temptation*

Scripture Lessons: Genesis 2:14-17, 3:1-7; MATTHEW 4:1-11

I grew up in a Catholic town where the public schools served enchiladas on Wednesday and fish on Friday. And my Catholic classmates gave up something for Lent - usually something that they didn't like anyway - like broccoli. They rarely gave up dessert.

Lent is 40 days to remind themselves that Jesus faced real temptations just like we do. So we choose something that makes us make choices everyday for discipline – and maybe even a hint of sacrifice.

That is what fasting really is. The exercise is to pick something this-worldly that occupies your time or attention or desire and put it away so that there is some space for you to take on some new spiritual ways. Lent is a season to pay attention to spiritual things – to make more important things more important, and realize that we spend time making less important things more important than they ought to be.

Presbyterians do Lent, but usually without the fasting – and maybe without the discipline. I mean, we generally don't go through spiritual exercises for a season that change our life style. It is a carry-over from the long history when we used to say Catholics believed a person is saved by works instead of grace. We are into grace, which means that God will save us no matter what we do – so the works are optional.

Well, we understand Catholics better now that we are talking to them all the time. And when we read the New Testament more often than we used to, we get a little nervous about this grace-instead-of-works thing, too. There are just too many places where the Word of scripture says we will be known by our fruits, that faith without works is dead, that faithfulness is what we DO for the least of these - stuff like that about spiritual works that may not be so optional. There may be some incentives to the discipline of Lent, with or without the sacrifice.

So here is a question at the start of Lent: What if Jesus had believed that grace did not need works? I mean, what if Jesus had said to himself, "Well, this being faithful to the task that God has given me all the time is just hard, and God loves me. So what if it gets too tough and I compromise some? God will love me anyway. Surely God will make up the difference for my weakness. After all, God said I'm the beloved Son!" I don't think it worked that way. It's another way that our ways may not be Christ's ways – more incentive for Lent.

The text says that Jesus was tested **after forty days of fasting**. Jesus knew how hard it would be to stay faithful in this very hard mission. He went into training. He fasted to test himself, to push himself, to see just how much he could take. He was "famished" is a nice English word for it. The root of the word means - you really didn't have to guess, *famé* means *starving*. By the end of the forty days, he was spiritually fed and physically hungry. Jesus goes out into the wilderness, gets himself weakened on purpose to find out how strong he can be when the test comes. The mission is that important. The enemy is that strong. The task is that tough. The goal is that great! His God is that good!

Jesus' only question is whether his faith is that strong. So he strengthens faith by focusing on faith.

And right on schedule the Tester shows up. Truth is, the test, the temptation is always around. The temptation is always there when we are weak and when we are strong, when we are tuned in and when we are distracted. It doesn't have to be a snake in the grass or a guy in a red suit with a pitchfork. That would make it easier. But it is rare that Evil shows up with a flashing sign saying "temptation, temptation."

How do we know whether or not some choice is Evil? Here's a clue from Matthew: If Jesus says he shows up disguised as the least of one of God's children, then maybe Evil shows up disguised as one of the greatest, best, most powerful, the most attractive things.

Look what happens in the tests in the wilderness:

Satan sides up to Jesus and says, "God said you are a loved Son, and you belong to God. God loves you and God is pleased with you. Why are you doing this to yourself? It's a waste of time. God doesn't want any children to be starving, much less you. Turn a stone to bread. It's not it's cake or something indulgent. Don't you just love the smell of fresh bread."

And Jesus answers, ***"Bread is bread and it feeds the body. But it doesn't feed the spirit, and the spirit is more important than the body. The spirit is what rules the body. I just went through some training to learn how strong the spirit can be - strong enough. I'll trust God and live faithful to the Spirit."***

My guess is that none of us have fasted for forty days lately, but we are still hungry for bread, or for some thing, or for some experience, or for the next thing that will fill some void in us where Evil has told us we are missing something. And that is the test: some thing, any thing, the next thing! ...the greatest, best, most powerful, the most attractive thing.

Whatever the thing may be that you think is missing in your life, turn it into a test to learn how strong you can be with God's help! Between now and Easter replace the hunger for the bread thing with some focus on more important spiritual life – like doing something for someone you love, or doing something for someone who you count as one of the least, or just thinking about all the people and loves and activities that are little and still more important than the hunger and emptiness for the big and great. Empty places are easier to fill with God's help than you think. You don't have to turn stones to bread. ...You can't.

Satan sides up to Jesus and says, "God gave you this mission to be Messiah and Savior, and I know you want to be a suffering servant and model of faithfulness. But people will listen a lot better if they are sure you are Messiah. So just show them that God favors you over everyone else, and they will come flocking. You're special. Throw yourself down."

And Jesus answers ***"Evil, how stupid do you think I am? I can't say I have to love others the way that God loves them, then show them I can escape their problems and troubles. You can't find an easy way out of a hard thing! You can't do some good in the world by doing a bad thing. The end never justifies a means that will compromise or destroy the end."***

For us living in a world with plenty of bread, this is the most tempting temptation. We love the big show or the great escape or the Super whatever more than we look for meaning and purpose in the small and real actions of everyday, difficult living. We keep looking to the top for

the person who is going to solve the problem we have helped create below. We think some big program will be the miracle to turn the company or the country around, or some new blood will energize the old body, or imitating the big success down the road or across town or in some other town will make our church great.

We want the easy way to get what is hard to get. We live in a culture that is into “right now” and one of the hardest and best lessons we could teach our children is to do without something by setting a good example. We live in a society that seldom chooses serving for the public good and never thinks of suffering for the sake of someone else - especially the least of those among us. We look to the top and the big splash for our salvation, and we miss the real work of saving that is going on all around us. We want someone to come to save us from the problems of our own making, and all the time we have the choice to stop doing the evil we have done and start doing the good we have left undone. How stupid can we be?

During this Lent, give up something you don't already have in that empty space that seduces you into dreaming of big things, and fill it with small things that add up to love. Get some distance from the fake life that isn't real living. Turn off “reality TV”; it's an oxymoron that turns us into morons. Spend a weekend with some people at the church working on a Habitat House. Do something small that will add to a real difference for God in the real world. God is found in the little things, and that means that nothing you do with God is that small.

So Satan sides up to Jesus for a final pitch, and says, “God wants you to show the kingdom of love to everyone. I'll give you all the kingdoms, and they will bow down to you. ...and you won't have to go through the sacrifices that love requires to get them.”

And Jesus answered, *“You're starting to repeat yourself. This sounds very familiar. I get the trophy without having to run the race. You hand me the prize without going through the pain. You tell me that love can win without having to love? Love wins in the end when love works to the end. Don't tempt love not to be love. Don't tempt God not to be God.”*

Here's the hard truth about the temptations. They are all the same old temptation.

Evil is always going to offer you something that you want – and something that Evil cannot deliver. When you look past the offer, you see the lie in it. The stone would have stayed a stone. Jesus would have been crushed in the jump. All the kingdoms of the world would have stayed the kingdoms of the world. Evil can't do miracles and Evil can't protect you from yourself, and Evil sure can't give you what it never owned.

The trick in the temptation, the real test in the testing is the simple fact that they are all the same old temptation: Trust God or the Evil One, live for good or be seduced by evil. God's will or my wants. It's really win *and* lose. Win what you want and you still lose it. Win the world and lose your life. Win the big splash and lose the joy of every day. Win stuff and lose your spirit.

Here's how we are different from Jesus in this testing and tempting thing. *We* have already said yes to Evil a bunch of times – so much so that it is a habit, a pattern, a way of living. “We have done those things we ought not to have done, and we have left undone those things we ought to have done.” We say it every week is some way or another in this Prayer of Common

Confession. It becomes a habit, too. We get used to the confessing more than the incentive to the changing.

It's Lent, and we have a chance to go into training and strengthen our faith in the testing. It's Lent, and we are behind the curve because all of us make more choices in our weakness than trusting the strength of Christ within us.

It's Lent, and we are not like Jesus in the wilderness in our sinning. But we also are not like Jesus in what we know that he did not know in the wilderness. We know now what happens after Lent. There is a resurrection. The Savior who refused to take care of himself first, who refused to do the easy thing, who refused to sell out for all the kingdoms of the world, gets raised from the dead to show that Spirit wins over bread, that faithfulness to the end is what insures the end, that the kingdoms of the world have always and will always belong to God.

So between now and Resurrection Sunday, trust the Savior who is with you in all that power. Take that thing that drives you to distraction and replace it with some thing that moves you closer to God. Take that wish for the big miracle and turn it toward the least action that will show some people that you and God love them. And when you just want it all or want whatever, realize that everything you will ever need you already have in a faithful Savior.