

March 1, 2020
First Sunday in Lent

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But He Answered, "It is Written"

Matthew 4:1-11

The longer I read the biblical text, the more strongly I believe you need to pay attention to what is actually there. We all grow a PERSONAL orthodoxy of belief, and it's tough to let go of some things, even if there is NO biblical support for what we believe.

In Bible studies through the years, many times views have been expressed with great sincerity and devotion until I finally say, "but what does the text actually say..." and it is always interesting to watch at that moment the mental reflection, "which is going to have more authority for me, what I personally believe, or what the text is telling me." A very important part of our faith in Christ is to be disciplined by the teaching of scripture, especially when it seems to contradict what we have grown to believe.

Which leads to the very first sentence in today's gospel. Who led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted? Was it the devil, who handcuffed the Lord, and forced him into a very unpleasant place to go through difficult temptations? No. The Spirit led him into the wilderness. Which asks the question of us, does God lead us into situations that are meant to test us? To see what we can manage. To find out if we are shrewd enough to recognize temptation and then know how to resist and win the struggle.

I absolutely believe that the Spirit leads us into situations of testing. I am always worried for those who have found new faith in Jesus Christ, especially in the first days of this new life, because their new faith is soon tested. And it is easy to fall away and say this is not worth it, God. The Holy Spirit, Christ almost immediately gets us out there in the training room, with tough disciplines, that begin to grow a new mind and heart, the mind and heart of Christ. And it isn't easy. Jesus says, we must be as shrewd as a serpent and harmless as a dove, how easy is that?

Mark's gospel empathizes this and says, "the spirit DROVE Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted." Matthew and Luke soften to say, "the spirit led him into the wilderness to be tempted."

The love of Christ in us is continually tested, and it will either grow and become stronger, or it will die. There may be an in-between here but I like to keep it simple, two options, either the love of Christ is growing in us through the work of the Holy Spirit, or we have caved, and it is silently dying.

The exercise craze is remarkable, isn't it? Spin class, Zumba, Pilates, yoga, elliptical machines, somewhere I remember seeing a whole block of glass windows, behind which were hundreds of people pumping and pulling on elliptical machines. All to stay in shape and to manage the day's stress.

I believe our life in Christ requires a similar discipline, a fitness without which we are an easy target for anger, jealousy, envy—all those things that can take over so quickly.

So the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. To see if he had what he needed to begin his ministry.

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He fasted forty days and forty nights, and he was famished. Notice the devil's first visit isn't until he had fasted a long time. Was it Jesus' decision to fast or did God tell him, "this is how it will work, Son, first fast forty days and nights." It was Jesus' decision, I believe. With fasting, one becomes vulnerable, and the testing becomes potent in determining what is on the heart. The Lord intends us to engage the tempter, to go head to head, toe to toe, to see what we have, fasting forty days and nights to prepare.

I tend to live my life in increments. I manage stress in the increments of a day. I say, well if I make it through this day and its stress, I can go home, have a glass of wine, build a fire and chill. I make it through the day because I put in my mind there is some relief at the end of the day.

With fasting, there is no relief, until the Lord gives it to you. With fasting, you eliminate all the buffers and protections of food, fellowship, and all those things that help us cope. You are alone in the wilderness, and the Spirit will see just what you have, if the love of Christ is inscrutable, and also, where weaknesses lie.

One of the reasons athletic competitions get more interesting as a season progresses is because of the discipline, training, concentration, and singlemindedness of the athletes as the season ends and the best meet in a contest.

Our life in Christ is in part a training, and a contest, to see if we can stand, finish the race, hold to grace, reconciliation, and love.

No fasting is perfect, but prayer changes when you go without and can lead to invaluable learning.

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Let's look at the three temptations of Jesus. The devil pushes Jesus to interpret the meaning, "if you are the son of God." The tempter suggests to Jesus it is privilege. If you are the son of God, make these stones bread. Could he make stones into bread? Should he? Is this what 'son of God' means? The Lord doesn't take the bait. But gives an almost boring response, what Sunday school teachers have been saying forever. What does the Bible say? It is written. Jesus uses scripture to interpret the meaning of Son of God. It is not privilege, not some supernatural capacity, but deeply rooted in the ancient faith of Israel. Jesus' defense in this testing is written text.

In the second temptation, the devil sees that scripture is the Lord's defense so he quotes it himself, a psalm that says with an exorbitant confidence that God will not allow anything bad happen to you, so jump from the pinnacle of the temple and see if the text is true.

Most of us have tested God with this one, haven't we? If God is good, why do bad things happen to me? And we lose faith because God fails that test. Jesus says, "it is written, 'do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" In any faithful life, there always lies this temptation to test God, is God reliable?

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In the last temptation, the devil claims the whole world as his own, to give to Jesus, if he will worship him. The temptation is to sell your soul for fame, attention, popularity, the spotlight. What a temptation for Jesus to be King of Israel, Lord of all creation, how clouded his mission would have become, had he yielded.

In a recent reading on spiritual life, the writer emphasizes that gifts for ministry come from the Lord and are given to do the work of Lord, and that if we forget this, and begin to use the Lord's gifts for our own benefit, we will have lost our way. The author had a poignant phrase, "selling your divine graces to popularity."

One of the most difficult temptations of pastoral work is to use the grace of Christ in one's life to draw attention to yourself, to become dependent on the praise of the congregation, and the importance one feels as the leader of a flock. Frequently clergy, myself included, do not even know when this has happened, that one's divine graces have been misused for one's self-enhancement instead of the glory, enhancement, and worship of God. "You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."

Clinging to this word of scripture, the way was clear for our Lord to make his way to cross, to accomplish God's will, the redemption and salvation of the world.

The text ends with this wonderful sentence, "the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him." It is a different reality you begin to move toward when the love of Christ becomes strong and dominant in one's life, angels come and wait on you, perhaps with a glass of wine, a fire in the fireplace, with the love of Christ strong in your heart and mind.

Let us all engage and be strong in this discipline of the Lord, to welcome the grace and power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, so we are free to see clearly the will of God and find the love to do it.