

*Lent I*

*Year A, 2014*

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. The Gospel that we read every year on this Sunday is the story of Jesus in the wilderness. It is a powerful story that helps us understand Jesus-- and ultimately helps us understand ourselves and God's mission for us in the world.

But at least sometime for some of us, I wonder if we get caught up in the description of this story as the "temptation" of Jesus and confuse it with our personal experience of temptation. When we think of being tempted, we may think of something more routine. Often it is something we have just given up for Lent—you know, like when that last piece of cake is calling our name.

But Jesus' time in the wilderness is about more than that. In the email I sent out to the parish with questions about the lessons for today, I asked you to think of this encounter between Jesus and Satan as a job interview. That imagery may seem too strange for you—it is not like the devil was going to hire Jesus. But Satan's role in the wilderness served a larger, divine purpose—he condensed down and presented the core issues that Jesus would soon face in his life and ministry. This encounter helped Jesus clarify and remember what was important in order for him to follow the course God was calling him to take.

In that sense, Jesus' time in the wilderness is about something beyond what we normally think of as "temptation." Jesus was hungry, but the issues he faced were about far more than food. We could call his forty days a time of discernment. At the end of his time, Jesus knew more fully who he was and how he would live into that identity. And the answers that came to him during those forty days show us how we can examine deep issues in our own discernment with good faith during these forty days of Lent.

Jesus' first answer revealed his reliance on God's Word—"One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Jesus lived on God's Word, the Hebrew Scriptures-- the Torah, Prophets, and Wisdom literature of ancient Israel. Jesus learned this Word from childhood. He meditated on it, discussed it, and even debated it from the time he was a youth.

But God's Word was also more than the printed text for Jesus. The Word was not limited to religious rules to be rigidly followed. The Word was not about judgment of the weak or condemnation of the sinful. Instead Jesus followed the Word to go deeper within his own soul and understand himself; and then to go beyond himself to connect with and understand other people. The Word came alive in Jesus as more than a text and that Word made clear to him what things were truly important—justice for people on the margins, mercy for sinners, and courage to do what's needed regardless of the cost.

That living and life giving Word was revealed throughout Jesus' life, teaching, and ministry. For example, we are told stories repeatedly in which Jesus healed people on the Sabbath. Religious

leaders saw that as a violation of the law and confronted him. But the Word inspired Jesus to see the flaws with that interpretation. The Word called Jesus to be compassionate and humane toward people in need of healing. And it made him righteously indignant at those leaders who didn't see what he saw. That Word is what Jesus pointed to when confronted by Satan in the wilderness. And that Word guided Jesus in his life and ministry.

Jesus second answer in the wilderness was rooted in something that may seem old fashion or hard to understand for some of us—humility. Jesus said, “Do not put the Lord to the test.” Jesus expressed a rock bottom humility in his relationship with God. Finding his way forward as a person and a minister would not be all about him. As Paul wrote, Jesus emptied himself of his equality with God and took on the form of a slave in order to serve others.

This humility would guide Jesus as a person and in his ministry. Jesus would follow God's plan and let it play out as God intended, not as Jesus thought best. We see this tension and ultimate trust most clearly as Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus struggled with what he saw coming next for him—his death. He prayed hard for another way forward. Yet finally Jesus was able to pray, “...your will be done.” Humility would govern Jesus' life and ministry.

The third answer in Jesus' discernment in the desert was about worship. For Jesus, worship was the ultimate priority, whether in his response to Satan or at any time throughout his life. Jesus is described as regularly participating in the synagogue. He came to the temple in Jerusalem with passion—as a youth engaging the teachers about the Word; and as a man, cleansing the temple of people who were more concerned with business than prayer. And we're told that Jesus prayed often. He taught his disciples the Lord's Prayer when he was with them one day. And often he would get up before dawn and go away by himself to pray.

Worship was central to Jesus in all aspects of his life. So when he was tested in the wilderness, Jesus was clear about what came first for him. It would not be power or popularity or any worldly measure of success. What mattered to Jesus was being true to the God he worshiped.

So how does Jesus time in the wilderness help us? How do his answers guide us in our own discernment during this Lent and for the rest of our life?

It depends to some degree on where we are in our journey. We may just be waking up to the reality that there is more to life than what we have been spending our time on so far. Perhaps we have been doing the career thing. Maybe we've been busy with getting everything in our lives just so. Perhaps we have been keeping up with the Joneses, so to speak. Or we have been working hard to be spiritually pure or politically correct. Whatever we have been preoccupied by, our time of discernment right now might help us find what else there is in life that is deeper and broader and kinder than how we have lived so far.

And if this is where we are, we can draw life from God's Word like Jesus did. Studying the written Word is an important and necessary first step. But it is more than that. It is engaging God's Word in prayer and community so that it opens us up and makes us aware of the depths of our own

soul and the complexity of the world around us. That Word is described in the letter to the Hebrews as “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing... (all that matters in life, including) the intentions of the heart.”

If we draw life from that Word, we can begin to better understand ourselves and shine light in our dark places that need healing, forgiveness, and renewal. That Word can help us connect with people around us and see the world differently. The Word that Jesus relied on teaches us things we don't expect. Like being rich and powerful is not necessarily what's best for us; in fact, it can get in our way as we seek God. The Word tells us that the poor are not to be despised and the marginalized are not to be feared. In fact, we see they are first in God's Word. And when we see through the lens of God's Word, we can better discern who we are and what we're called to be.

And if in our life we're tempted to think that the world revolves around us or that we deserve to get all that we want in life, let us remember what Jesus knew-- be humble; don't confuse who you are with who God is. If Jesus was able to live that way, then we can follow the same path. That path led to the cross for Jesus. So as we discern our path as individuals and as a community of faith, there may be—no, there will be—pain and suffering and all sorts of challenges as well as redemption and grace. Discernment will lead us through a wilderness.

And if we're not clear on what truly matters in life, let us remember what Jesus knew-- the ultimate priority of worship. For us, that means opening our heart in prayer and thanksgiving to God in all times and places. And coming to church regularly to sing, pray, listen, and celebrate together. Because being shaped by our common worship makes a difference when we feel overwhelmed by the external influences of life.

Through worship we have access to grace that changes us. We can say with Paul that “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” I am more than a leaf in the current of life being buffeted and feeling out of control. For when I feel out of control, I know I worship the God who is in control and provides peace and comfort, no matter what I face. If we really believe that the God who created the universe loves us, loves me, what else can we do but worship? If we believe, our worship bubbles up from our heart.

So as we begin our time of discernment in this holy season of Lent, let us look to Jesus and his discernment for the answers that will guide us as individuals and as a community of faith. Amen.