

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

The season of Epiphany is over. Jesus as God incarnate has been revealed to us in any number of ways. And now we have arrived at the season of Lent. Last Wednesday we got ashes put on our foreheads and heard the sobering words, "Remember you are but dust and to dust you shall return." Lent officially began at that moment. It is the season in which we are asked to take stock of ourselves and our relationship with God. Where do we stand? How do we see ourselves? How do we see measure up? Where are the chinks in our armor...the places where we are the weakest and most vulnerable? What seems to be more important to us than God? These are the kinds of questions we ask ourselves. During the season of Lent, we put ourselves to the test by giving up something that we think is not good for us or something that we see as interfering in our relationship with God. And sometimes we add things that we believe will improve our conscious awareness of God. Either way, Lent is the season of taking stock and making change and testing ourselves in our resolve.

The story of Jesus' temptation by the devil in the wilderness is one that is very familiar to many of us. Having been identified as God's son immediately after his baptism, Jesus is put to the test right away to determine just what sort of son he is going to be. Will he remain faithful to the Father and to his mission here on earth or will his human side take over? When St. Paul wrote his letter to the Romans (Chapter 12:18) he described what Jesus did for all of us: "Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all." Adam's and Eve's decision to defy God and eat the forbidden fruit led to their death and their banishment from the Garden of Eden. So part of Jesus' mission here on earth is to correct that error and provide a pathway for all humanity to be restored to God through God's grace.

In his time in the desert where his divine nature and human nature will do battle, Jesus is presented with three scenarios...each of which tap into his very human side. Jesus has been fasting for days on end when the devil asks him to demonstrate how powerful he is by turning a stone into a loaf of bread. For any of us who have ever been hungry...even for just a few hours...we know the overwhelming force that propels us to seek food no matter what! Jesus knows that he can turn the stone into bread and his human side must have wanted badly to do just that. There's the chink in his armor...his very human side with very human physical needs. That's where his vulnerability is. That's where vulnerability is for all of us. The question

is: Will Jesus use his power to circumvent the laws of nature and get what his humanity desperately needs or will he resist? There is inherently nothing wrong with taking care of human hunger. So what's the problem? Why does Jesus resist? He resists for one reason. The power God has provided him is to be used only to further the kingdom of heaven, not to satisfy Jesus' human needs. If Jesus is to complete his mission, it is imperative that the divine side of his nature wins, not the human side. Has it ever occurred to you that humanity's fall and God's grace-filled redemption of humanity center around stories about food? It's not that there's anything wrong with food. We all need it, but food itself can be a battleground for us. Maybe that's why so many of our Lenten disciplines involve giving up some kind of food or making an effort to eat more carefully.

But the testing for Jesus doesn't end there. The devil also shows Jesus the nations and promises Jesus that if he will bow down and worship Satan, all of the nations will be ruled by Jesus. Given what the Jewish tradition is of the Messiah...that he will be both a political figure and a military leader...there is nothing inherently wrong with Jesus being the ruler over all nations. He would probably be a good ruler. As a matter of fact, he already knows that after he has completed his mission and returned to earth, every knee will bow and every voice will honor his name. So Jesus knows that if he obeys God he will eventually have what the devil is offering him right now...but it will be at great cost to Jesus. If he obeys God, it will mean that he will have to die on the cross. It would be so much easier...and surely less painful...if he could take a shortcut and get that kind of power and authority now...without going to the cross. That's the human side of him talking. That's the pull and tug that all of us feel from time to time. We can say to ourselves about the shortcut, "Oh, it won't matter. I'm going to get there anyway. Why should I have to wait when I can have what is rightfully mine right now?" Taking shortcuts is a human temptation for all of us in so many different situations and yet, deep down inside we know that is *does* make a difference if we take the shortcut. When we don't allow God's timing to prevail; when we take matters into our own hands, we step outside the will of God.

Through all three of these temptations, the devil continues to taunt Jesus. When we are alone and lost in our own solitude, how easy it is for us to listen to that voice that taunts and berates us...that little nagging doubt that keeps telling us that we aren't enough...we aren't good enough or smart enough or strong enough. That's the tempting little voice that wants us to doubt. In the third temptation, the devil takes Jesus to the top of the tallest spire on the Temple and dares him to jump off and to count on the fact that God will send his angels to save him. Throughout these temptations the devil has quoted scripture over and over again to make it sound like all of these temptations are based in scripture. If it's in the Bible, it's OK...right? Just beware of someone trying to win an argument by quoting scripture. As Jesus shows us, there's usually a counter for every scripture passage that is misused. For this challenge, the devil quotes Psalm 91:11-12, the psalm that we just sang this morning: "For he will command

his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” The temptation put before Jesus is the temptation of doubt. Does God love Jesus as much as Jesus surely knows that God does? The two of them are one. Jesus knows, but he’s being invited to doubt. And at the end of his mission, from the cross, Jesus’ very human side wonders about God’s love and divine protection, “My God. My God. Why have you forsaken me?” Jesus cries. There are times when even Jesus wonders about God’s faithfulness and protection. But as the devil tempts Jesus to test this out, Jesus responds with his own bit of scripture in Deuteronomy 6:16 “It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

Jesus walks away completely intact from these three temptations by the devil who is unable to get Jesus to veer from either his relationship and trust in God or his earthly mission. Jesus doesn’t budge. The human side of his nature never gets the upper hand. That’s the kind of Son of God that he is.

All of us have within us that divine spark...that divine nature. All of us have within us that struggle between our very human nature which is powerful in itself and our divine instincts which guide us in a different direction. Whatever we are able to do to withstand the human instincts that threaten to lure us away from the love of God is not through our own strength or will. It is through the grace of God. And the way we tap into and experience that grace is the extent to which we are willing to trust God...in the darkest and most dire of circumstances. Are we willing to trust God and God’s timing when it seems to us to be so much smarter and more expedient to take the shortcut?

Lent is about our own series of temptations...not in whether or not we sneak a piece of chocolate or drink an alcoholic beverage when we said we wouldn’t...but in whether or not we are willing to fully and completely trust in God and to embrace God’s grace and forgiveness even as the devil reminds us that we don’t deserve it. Those chinks in our armor are the very human aspects of our nature that struggle against the divine. The chinks in our armor are the places where we are vulnerable...where our own strength fails us. When we do trust God, we change in unexpected ways. The chinks in our armor are no longer our downfall. And it’s not because we shored them up. It’s because God did.

God strengthens us when we ask.  
Loves us when we don’t deserve it  
and pursues us with a relentless energy that will not be denied.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.