

Luke 4:1-13

Our gospel reading from Luke this morning has to be one of the most familiar readings during the Lenten season. Every year we are reminded how Jesus was led into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, how he resisted the temptations, and how the devil wasn't finished with him.

Even though I have to find a different way to present a message on this text, I actually look forward to this reading because I am drawn in by the drama I have pictured in my mind how Jesus fasted and prayed, and how after he was physically weak the devil came. I see the scenes where the devil talks as shrouded in darkness. The devil's words and attitude being very enticing and alluring. The temptations he presents in scenes that are bright and shiny. Then Jesus pure and full of light. Three very important messages are in the text... Jesus strengthened himself by fasting and prayer. When he was at his physical weakest Jesus was at his spiritual strongest. Jesus did not succumb to any of the temptations of the devil. I don't know if his fully human being was drawn to what the devil was offering him, but his fully God being was in control because he had attended to his spiritual needs. And finally, the devil departed from him until an opportune time.

One of the first ideas that comes to mind when we think of or hear those words "spiritual disciplines" is fasting. Most likely because that is the one the Bible mentions most often. There are a lot more spiritual disciplines than that. In my experience, we protestants are a bit weak on the spiritual discipline side of our faith. Richard Foster has written an excellent book. "Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth". In the first section of his book, he discusses the disciplines that first come to mind, such as prayer, study, fasting, meditation. The second section of his book deals with topics we don't often think about as spiritual disciplines: simplicity, solitude, submission, and service. The last part is somewhat familiar with confession, worship, guidance, and celebration.

I think we miss out on a lot of spiritual experiences when we limit ourselves in our spiritual disciplines, or we don't practice them at all. During Lent we often "fast" from something like coffee, chocolate, tv and other things that we really miss when we don't have them. We're supposed to think on Jesus when we have the longings for those things. When we were preparing for something in our United Methodist Annual Conference once, the Bishop asked pastors to fast from after lunch Thursday through lunch Friday; that method of fasting works well in that it is a 24 hour fast but for some reason doesn't seem as intense as a full day.

Often during Lent we are encouraged to instead of fasting from something, to add something like Bible study or meditation. This spiritual discipline also draws us into a closer relationship with Jesus. Another spiritual discipline Foster discusses is simplicity. I have a few pastor friends who each year will go through their house every day during Lent with a large garbage bag and fill it with the things they do not need. That makes 40 bags of garbage or donations by the end of the season, a way of finding simplicity in their lives in that there is less clutter. Yet Foster warns that without an inward simplicity, that being a focus on the Triune God not possessions or riches, there is no truthful outward expression, even if you do eliminate 40 bags of stuff from your home. Jesus lived a very simple life, and he can be our example and mentor.

We can look to Jesus when we are tempted by the things of this world. When the devil tempted him with bread we can see more than refusing the hunger of food. We can see the refusal of possessions. And even more than that we can see the refusal of attitudes. Two weeks ago, in our scripture and sermon, Jesus told us to love our enemies. Letting go of the attitude of them against us is so very difficult. It is a sociological tenant there is an in group and an out group and the out group are our enemies. This engenders solidarity within the group. Jesus wants us to find a new way of solidarity, one that includes prayer and love for one's enemies. Not a popular notion in today's world. But think of what would happen if millions of people prayed for Putin to be blessed, not in the way he wants, but in the way God wants.

In the next temptation the devil offered Jesus rulership of the entire world, if only he would worship the devil. Jesus's response "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." Again our first thoughts most likely go to Putin who is trying to take over provinces that do not belong to him. We most likely think, 'If only he served God he would not be invading Ukraine,' but seriously, there are other ways a person covets what is not theirs other than by launching an attack on their neighbor. Our culture conditions us to want what we don't have so that we will buy more, more, more. When we don't have the spiritual discipline of simplicity we fall for these campaigns.

The final temptation of Jesus was to throw himself off the pinnacle of the highest tower and call upon God to save him. How often do we expect God to rescue us from our foolish choices? Rather than asking God to guide our choices, we tend to invite God to support what we have already decided. I know a woman who decided she was going to have a relationship with a man. She'd already made her decision before she reached out in prayer to God. When she decided to do that, she sat with a Bible in her lap and prayed, "God, may your word guide me in this relationship." Then she opened her Bible and read what she supposedly believed God wanted to say to her. The passage she read was Matthew 7:15, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves." Upon reading this she immediately thought, "I think I remember learning that it isn't good to open the Bible expecting a magical answer. Anyway, no matter what, I've decided to be with this man, so God please bless this relationship." This time she should have taken the word of God at its reading because the man was a snake and put her through misery she never would have experienced if she hadn't had her mind made up before she invited God into her plan.

But Jesus stood firm in his choice to not take God's protection for granted. He responded by saying, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Don't intentionally invite God to condone what you've already determined to carry out without considering what God would want before your decision is made.

The last verse of today's gospel reading tells us that the devil departed him until he could find another opportunity to tempt him or confront him again. Sometimes don't we think that Jesus' struggle with the devil was over once he went through these temptations? The Bible doesn't tell us of any ongoing confrontation. Yet, we see Jesus fighting demons all throughout the gospel. The devil didn't give up on Jesus easily. And he doesn't give up on us easily either. We may think we've got it made, we've accepted Jesus and the devil is done. Perhaps. Yet don't we face temptations every day? Is there a day that goes by that we aren't tempted to tell a little white lie, or not to say anything when the waitress hasn't added something to our bill that we received in our order, or to shop for things we really don't need, or to stop loving our enemy?

Again, don't we hear people twist scripture to defend their actions? The devil knows scripture better than we do and can make it seem as though what he's saying is the truth. That's why we need to know the Bible, why we need to practice the spiritual discipline of reading and meditating on scripture. If we don't know what the Bible says people can tell us something that may sound biblical but isn't. Live out the first words of the second reading from Romans that we heard today, "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart." Know God's word so well that you cannot be deceived. Practice spiritual disciplines, commune with God, allow the Holy Spirit to guide you knowing that if you slide God still loves you and you can be forgiven. Allow Lent to be a beginning of drawing closer to God, not just a 4 day season.

All glory be to God.