



## *“Lent: Why Bother?”*

Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

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First Sunday in Lent

I'm fairly certain Henry Ward Beecher and the founders of Plymouth Church would roll over in their graves if they knew we observe Lent. They were part of a long Puritan tradition that resisted religious symbols and traditional rituals. Lent, they thought, was a medieval perversion of the gospel to be avoided.

They had a point. Rituals do tend to get in the way of spiritual reality. Focus moves to the ritual itself and away from the thing it is supposed to point to. Means tend to become ends when humans are involved.

And, truth be told, over time, church practice trivialized Lent by moving the focus to details like which food should be avoided during the season. More tragic was the tendency to make Lent a time of morbid introspection instead of constructive self-evaluation. What was intended to be of spiritual formation became, instead, a time of sad, even morbid, introspection that featured feeling bad about yourself.

But misuse of a religious tradition is no final argument against it. Lent is a case in point. In fact, Lent was one of the earliest Christian traditions. In the early centuries of the Christian movement, converts to the faith went through a 40-day period of preparation for their baptism. All baptisms were on Easter morning so the preparation time was the 40 days prior to Easter. The focus of baptismal preparation was self-examination and concentration — self-examination, because baptism back then was a clean and decisive break from paganism that, in the Roman Empire, tended to be dangerous, and Lent featured concentration on the saving acts of God on Good Friday and Easter morning. Lent went to the cross but quickly moved to the joy of Easter morning.

Soon, the practice of spiritual preparation for Easter became a practice of all Christians. They called it Lent. The idea was an annual spiritual discipline designed for spiritual growth. In some ways Lent was a “back-to-basics” movement. It was a spiritual journey with Jesus from his Temptation in the Wilderness to Good Friday and Easter morning. Fasting became a means of preparation to sharpen the physical and spiritual appetite for the great feast of Easter.

Focusing on whether to eat certain foods or not is hardly the point. Fasting is a means to a larger end — spiritual formation. The point of Lent is to open our lives to the God revealed in Jesus Christ by focusing on our lives and the place of faith in our lives.

The proper Lenten question is not what you are giving up for Lent. Proper questions are: Where is my faith? What is my life? What does it mean to be me? What does it mean for me to be a follower of Jesus Christ? How does my faith touch my life?

For more than a thousand years, the Gospel Lesson for the first Sunday of Lent is the story of Jesus' Temptation in the Wilderness. It is a good beginning for the work of Lent in us.

The story clarifies the essentials of life and faith and, if we listen, marginalizes the trivial. This story is good for us. It forces us to face some basic facts of life.

It's an important story at the beginning of the gospel story. The early Christians thought it was so important, it was included in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. It's worth hearing annually.

However, like many of the bible stories, it's easy to miss the point of the narrative. We worry about whether the story is to be taken literally or a whether it is a personal vision Jesus encountered. Some people get sidetracked by Satan and the voice of Satan in the story. Is there a personal devil, they wonder.

Perhaps the largest problem with the story is that, on first glance, it seems remote from most human experience. Who of us has been tempted to turn stones into bread? Only a very few humans (and likely none of us) are tempted by the prospect of world power. And I'm pretty sure none of us will be tempted to jump off a building to show off God's power.

In fact, however, the story is about the most basic facts of anyone's life. Jesus' temptations focused on his identity and his mission. So do ours. His questions were what does it mean to be Jesus and how would he accomplish the mission God gave him in life. The ultimate questions of anyone's life are: 'Who am I?' and 'What am I meant to do with my life?'

The temptation of Jesus follows hard on his baptism. If you remember, at his baptism, Jesus heard the divine voice declare, "You are my beloved son...." In his temptation, he heard a demonic voice declare, "If you are the Son of God, then...." Each temptation is preceded by the voice, "If you are God's son, then...." Each "If you are..." is followed by a temptation to use his position and his powers to accomplish God's mission in ways most people expected or desired.

If you are the Son of God, turn stones into bread – use your gifts and powers for yourself. If you are the Son of God, become the leader of all the political powers on earth. What a powerful way to get things done. If you are the Son of God, throw yourself off the temple in full view and challenge God's angels to save your life. Be a spectacular Messiah, dazzle the people, and surely they will follow you into God's kingdom.

Many people expected God to send precisely that kind of savior, a Messiah who would be a king and military genius to drive the oppressive Romans out. Others wanted a religious reformer to clean up Jerusalem and restore the ancient traditions in their pure form.

Jesus would have none of it. No sooner did he feed the 5,000, than people asked him to make some more bread. No doubt such a miracle would attract multitudes and do much good. He firmly said, "No." More than once, people, including his disciples, wanted to make him a king. Each time he said, "No." His brothers urged him to go to Jerusalem and show his stuff and clean up the place. Again, he said, "No."

There was nothing inherently wrong with any of that — and this is what makes real temptation so insidious — but Jesus was convinced being the Son of God and doing God's mission required another kind of Son and leader. The temptation was for Jesus to do less than God wanted, or to do God's will in another way than required.

What he did do — how he accomplished God's mission — was quite different than conventional wisdom, then and now, suggested. He built God's kingdom — and defeated demonic powers — by a radical method. He showed compassion to all and offered a radical inclusiveness to everyone, including the Roman enemies. He spent his powers restoring people who needed healing and redeeming those whose lives were shattered.

Every act and word was a gesture fitting the kingdom of God. Jesus did God's work on earth by sacrificial service on behalf of people for the sake of the healing of the world.

His temptation was to forget his baptismal identity as God's Son and use religion and personal power for himself, or to take shortcuts to do God's work. The way of God in the world was the way of the cross, sacrificial service on behalf of world for the sake of restoring the world. A proper sense of 'sonship' required a heart ready to die for the sake of the world. The way to defeat the evil powers that corrupt us and the world is the way of the cross.

When our son was an adolescent he began "to act out" as we say these days. Gloria and I both decided on a remedy. Each of us spoke to him alone. I sat across the table from him and said, "You are my son. You bear my name. Therefore, you cannot make me stop loving you. So stop trying."

Ironically, my father and I had the same conversation a generation earlier. Dad put a different twist on it, but it came out the same. I was a student in boarding school and got myself in big trouble. It happened that Dad was on the board of the school. He came to visit and we took a long walk down a very long hallway in the school.

"You have to learn the hard way," he said. I answered, "Apparently so." Then Dad said words burned into my soul to this day. "David," he said, "you are my son and you bear my name. Having my name comes with responsibilities. Be careful how you bear my name."

That bothered me then and still haunts me. I am myself, not my father. However, bearing any family name, belonging to any family, bears responsibilities. Belonging to God's family, bearing the name of Jesus Christ, has large personal and ethical consequences.

Our temptation, every day of our lives, is to forget our baptismal identity. By baptism we bear Christ's name and we are named God's dearly loved child. And by baptism we are incorporated into a family given the responsibility of accomplishing God's mission on earth in the ways God wants that mission done.

We are required to use our selves, our gifts, our talents, and our vocations to serve God's purposes, not our own. That means God wants us to use what we are and what we have to serve the good, not evil; to nourish life, not diminish it; to build up, not tear down; to enrich the world, not exploit it. To be a child of God means to have a life and faith that point beyond ourselves to something or someone worth living for – and, yes, dying for.

We owe it to our children and grandchildren to point them beyond themselves. We must teach them that the real success is the content of their character and their contribution to the healing of the world, not the conventional "successes" of our time. What schools they get into, the grades they make, and the professions they choose are secondary to their identity as God's dearly loved children and their mission to do God's work on earth.

Lent is about making us disciples of Jesus Christ — disciples who know who we are and know what God made us to do.

Lent also reminds us how such a journey of faith begins. No sooner did Jesus emerge from the wilderness and his temptation than he enlisted others to join him in his divine mission. "Come, follow me," he said. Christian faith begins with the decisive decision to become an apprentice of Jesus Christ. It means casting our primary allegiance to God and God's cause on earth. Following Jesus means giving our life to God's work on earth.

Our Epistle Lesson puts it wonderfully, "whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." That is Jesus' universal call, "whoever." All are invited to join God's great mission earth. No one is excluded because of race, gender, nationality, social status, or any other human impediment.

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Yet, God's salvation is particular. It's not automatic, we have to call on God. And when we do, we will be saved.

God continually calls us in Jesus Christ, and Lent is such an annual invitation. Jesus calls us to pledge our allegiance to him, to become his apprentice, to learn how to live in his classroom, to have our character shaped by his presence and word.

Lent is back to basics, recommitment and spiritual effort. And it ends wonderfully – Easter morning when we celebrate the life of God flooding the world in the risen Christ.

Amen.

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