

“THE TEMPTATIONS OF LENT”

Lent 1C February 21, 2010

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16;

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

Introduction:

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, although we are already four days into the season. The season of Lent is characterized as forty days. The count began on Ash Wednesday and will end on Holy Saturday. Sunday's are not counted as part of the 40 days of Lent because Sunday's are feast days – not fasting days. Sundays are celebrations of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, not days for sackcloth and ashes.

So, even though our Sunday worship services during Lent will have liturgical reminders of Lent's theme of Penitence, we will seek to keep alive the celebration dimension of Sunday because all of our penance is not worth a hill of beans if Jesus has not been raised from the grave. If Jesus is not alive we are no better off than Muslims or Buddhists, for we are worshipping a dead man and hoping for something that is impossible. The resurrection of Christ, and the hope it imparts, is what separates Christianity from all other religions. We worship a living Savior, not a dead holy man. Amen?

During this season of Lent, I've issued a challenge. The challenge is this: “What does God want you to do in order to grow closer to Jesus Christ, and

THE TEMPTATIONS OF LENT

God's will for your life?" I've stated that God will probably want you to either give-up or take-up something.

For instance, let's pretend that you are being controlled by an addiction, or an improper relationship, or a bad habit like lying. The Holy Spirit might speak within your soul and lovingly challenge you to give-up that which is adversely affecting your soul. It will take courage and a deeper trust in God's will than you currently have. Thus, you will probably have to begin praying more, reading Scripture more, and worshipping God more intentionally than you have previously done.

Conversely, the Holy Spirit might speak to you and challenge you to take-up something that will bring healing, or growth to your life, or to begin serving others in some specific way. God might speak to you about beginning a new habit of daily prayer, or Bible Study, or some specific act of service on behalf of someone else, or a new exercise regimen, or a new way of eating. And, to successfully take up this new lifestyle will require a deeper level of trust in God's will, and a strong determination to see it through. This might push you into new habits of prayer, Scriptural meditation, or more intentional worship participation.

The thing is, when God is calling us to

THE TEMPTATIONS OF LENT

something new, the Devil is right behind tempting us to fail. So, whether God is encouraging you to lay something down, or take up something new, you will need courage, determination, and the infilling of God's Holy Spirit in order to overcome the temptation to fail. We see this dynamic modeled for us in Today's Gospel lesson dealing with

The Temptations of Christ:

The Temptations of Jesus in the Wilderness occur just before he begins his public ministry and immediately after his baptism in the Jordan river, when the Holy Spirit had descended upon Jesus "like a dove" and a voice from heaven was heard to say, "*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased*" (Mark 1:9-11; par. Matt 3:13-17; Luke 3:21-22).

This temptation event in Jesus' life, and our journey through Lent, find context with each other: First, the Scripture say that Jesus was "Led" by the Holy Spirit. A better translation reads, he was "driven" by the Spirit. There is more force in 'driven' than being 'led'. Jesus had just been baptized and filled with God's Holy Spirit. Now, the Spirit of God "drives" Jesus into the wilderness in order to be tested - tempted by the devil. How do any of us withstand the Devil's temptations? We look at the model provided by Jesus who was tempted in every way

THE TEMPTATIONS OF LENT

even as we are, yet sinned not. Jesus was not alone in that wilderness; the Holy Spirit was with him to help him resist the temptations he had to face.

Likewise, whatever God leads you into this season of Lent, to either pick-up or lay-down, you can accept the challenge with the insight and courage that what God calls you to do, God also supplies the resources you will need to accomplish His will. The Spirit of God is not going to lead us outside of God's will; nor will the Spirit of God lead us into something and then desert us.

So, we learn from Jesus that the Holy Spirit will lead us into God's will. Secondly, we learn that because Jesus faced temptation from Satan did not mean he had moved outside God's will for his life. Jesus was not running away from God when he went into the wilderness. In fact, He was moving in harmony with God's will for his life. Nor, did God abandon him when he was being tempted.

Thirdly, when we fall into temptation, we should not say that it is God who is tempting us. God knows when we are going into a period of temptation; but that doesn't mean God is causing it. When I was involved in teaching my children how to ride a bicycle, I was conflicted. On-the-one hand, I wanted them to learn how

THE TEMPTATIONS OF LENT

in order to gain that sense of pride, joy, and freedom that comes with being able to ride a bicycle. On-the-other hand, I knew they would not learn how to ride without also falling down and suffering a cut, or scrapes, or bruises, and I would have to listen to their pain as they cried out. I knew they were going to fall, but that didn't mean I was causing the fall. It is the same with God.

God goes through our Temptations with us; experiences the hurt, pain, struggle of failure, as well as the joy of overcoming the temptation. But God doesn't cause the temptation. That is the Devil's weapon. So, we don't blame God for the temptation, but we do praise Him for the deliverance.

The one who met Jesus in the wilderness after fasting for 40 days was not God; the one who confronts Jesus is the supreme personification of evil, referred variously as the devil, or the tempter, or Satan. But, wisdom requires that we understand that what God calls us to, the Devil tries to prevent. The Devil does not want us to trust God's will for our lives. His effort to break the relationship between human beings and God Almighty began with Adam and Eve; the devil got between God's will and their wills. He tried to do the same with Jesus, and he tries the same temptation with all of us.

THE TEMPTATIONS OF LENT

Because you are a born-again, filled with the Holy Spirit, Christian does not mean you are immune to Satan's temptations. The more you seek to follow God's will, the more the Devil ramps up his temptations. Why waste good temptations on someone who is already not following God's will. So, in this odd way of viewing temptation I remind you of this teaching from James: "*Count it all joy my sister and brother when you fall into various temptations; for the testing of your faith produces endurance.*" A good case can be made that when you are confronted with serious temptation it is precisely because you are seeking to follow God's will for your life. That was the case with Jesus and it is the case with each of us.

It took the baptism of the Holy Spirit, reliance on God's Spirit, and the authority of God's Word for Jesus to successfully overcome the Devil's temptations. No less will be expected of us.

The Lenten challenge is for 40 days – actually more if you count the Sunday's of Lent. Forty is one of those Biblical numbers that can be both literal and figurative: There were 40 days of rain that produced the flood during Noah's time. Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years during the exodus from Egypt. Jesus fasted in the Wilderness for 40 days, thus preparing

THE TEMPTATIONS OF LENT

him for his temptations. So, don't get hung up if your temptation to fail at what God wants you to do during this season of Lent lasts more or less than 40 days. Today's lessons reminds us

IT IS THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY THAT IS IMPORTANT.

The lesson from Deuteronomy is a reminder that God delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt and gave them a land overflowing with milk and honey. The Exodus can be viewed as a type of salvation that foreshadows the salvation God is offering us through Jesus Christ. Therefore, God will deliver us from the temptations of our sins and deliver us to Heaven – a land overflowing with milk and honey.

The lesson from Psalm 91 reminds us that, if we decide to dwell in the shelter of God's love for us, we receive a promise of eternal security. That is, evil will never have the final say in our lives. Even in this world, where evil reigns along with Satan, the Prince of this world, God's angels are watching out for us, protecting us in ways we often don't realize or recognize. One of Satan's temptations to Jesus comes directly from this Psalm. Even the Devil reads, and misapplies, Holy Scripture.

The lesson from Romans reminds us that God's

THE TEMPTATIONS OF LENT

saving word is as near to us as our lips and our heart. If we believe God's word, confess it, apply it to our lives, we enter into a more powerful relationship with God than just believing that Jesus is the Savior, and hoping that we don't suffer too much in this world before going to Heaven. We still get there, but there isn't much "abundant living" in a relationship devoid of the power of God's Word active in our lives. It is how Jesus confronted His temptations from the devil – through the power of God's Word and Spirit; and it how we also need to operate.

Why was it important for Jesus to go through those temptations? Because overcoming them strengthened Him for the ministry that lay ahead. As you accept the Lenten challenge you are also acknowledging the probability of temptations arranged to break your will to follow God's will for your life. Jesus has shown us how to respond. The Spirit and the Word are ours. Be filled with the Spirit and feed on God's Holy Word! Have a blessed and temptation overcoming season of Lent.