

MARCH 1, 2020

1ST SUNDAY IN LENT

YEAR A

“The gift ‘40’ can be”

There is a great deal that can be said about our Gospel reading this First Sunday in Lent — about this so familiar story which ‘launches’ Lent for us every year in one version or another.

Indeed, I have gone deep into one or another of the ways Jesus is taunted by the tempter. However, I find myself standing still at the beginning. I am caught up now by the power of 40 days and the gift that such ‘40’ can be. Although it may not seem to be ‘gift’ at first.

Forty days and forty nights Noah and his family and all the then known species of the world rode out the storm, the flood, to emerge into a new world, the old having been destroyed

Forty years the people of Israel wandered in the desert before entering the promised land, having been formed into a people in God’s Image.

Forty days and forty nights both Moses and Elijah spent fasting in the wilderness.

Forty days and forty nights Jesus also fasted in the wilderness. Forty days and forty nights. Forty.

Some say that ‘forty’ in the context of days or years just signifies a very long time. And it was. And it is.

Some say that a period of ‘forty’ breaks up the story line, indicating that something old is over and something new is beginning. And this is also so.

And yes, forty is the number of days in which we pause at this time of year every year. Only for many of us, the ‘pausing’ does not come easy.

As I consider the fact that these forty days and nights came before Jesus began his formal ministry, I am convinced that is perhaps the only way it could have happened. Oh, later we hear about him carving out hours, perhaps even a day or two here or there for such 'time apart,' but forty days and forty nights would seem to have not been possible. Not once the teaching, the healing, the calling, the following, the feeding, the miracles started.

We must first notice that it was the Spirit who led Jesus into a place where he could be tempted, though God himself was using it only as a test. If Jesus were to be able to stand in the place of the nation of Israel and indeed the human race as a whole, he had to be victorious where we have failed; he must withstand the temptations of the Devil and never succumb, otherwise he would be disqualified as Messiah and Savior.

Notice that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to fast for forty days and forty nights (probably recalling by way of parallelism Israel's 40 years in the wilderness, where she grumbled at God because of the lack of food) and that it was when Jesus was at his weakest that the Devil came to him to tempt him. It is a safe thing to assume that the Devil will attack us when we're at our weakest and in the area that we're most vulnerable. In this case, it was a temptation regarding hunger and food.

Now, some think that since the Devil said to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God" he was trying to get Jesus to doubt what God had just told him at his baptism, namely, "This is my Son, whom I love." But the first two temptations themselves seem to argue against this interpretation. It seems that the Devil, the Tempter as Matthew calls him in verse 3, assumes that Jesus believes He is the Son of God, so he tries another trick. He tempts Jesus to use his Sonship in an ungodly, sinful way. Now there is nothing inherently wrong with turning stones into bread unless it is not God's will. And this is the

case here. The Devil is trying to get Jesus to exercise his powers of Messianic Sonship apart from the will of the Father. This would be sin. We must also recognize that underlying this temptation, and in fact fueling it, is a view of God, like the one the Devil sold Adam and Eve. The Devil is, in effect, trying to teach Christ that God cannot be trusted to meet his needs, that he doesn't care and that if He wants to save His life he had better act now. In the Devil's definition, life is basically physical "bread alone" in Jesus' response, not spiritual communion with and obedience to God. In essence God is not good and cannot be trusted. This is one of the litanies of lies that Eve bought into when the Devil had convinced her that God was withholding from her by not allowing her to eat from the tree.

Well, we know that Jesus responded to the Devil with Scripture which was properly interpreted. His use of "it is written" indicates a firm commitment to the written word of God and its finality as the authority for a life lived in obedience to God. He believed Deuteronomy 8:3 (as he did the rest of Scripture)! Jesus does not deny that man has physical needs, but only that therein does not lay the totality of one's life. Thus, Jesus teaches us that when God takes us through times of testing it is better to trust him and hold up under it than it is to devise a sinful strategy to get out from under God's appointed trials. We can only do this if we believe that God is good and has our best interests at heart. If we deny this, we will not be able to have any kind of relationship with him in the midst of difficult times. Now that is not to say that we won't struggle with these issues, but we must draw near to God and ask for grace to help us in our time of need.

So, Jesus is a great model for us when we face temptations. The three temptations 1) temptation of relevance: stone into bread; 2) temptation to be spectacular: a miraculous rescue if Jesus would throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple; 3) temptation of power: Jesus enticed to pursue glory and authority through political

power. All these have one thing in common; self. The devil trying to make Jesus use his Father's power for himself. It's pretty much how all people think, me first. Only what they can get for themselves. And that was so not Jesus. He didn't let the devil trick him, Jesus knew then what matter to him.

These temptations are still common to the human race.

- 1) People still want free food when hungry. Bread is symbolic of food and money.
- 2) People still want God to do "magical miracles" and rescue us from our foolish decisions.
- 3) People still want the glory, recognition, and authority of political power.

For many, the most distressing thing about the story of Christ's temptations is the way the devil quotes scripture with such fluidity and conviction. That Jesus knows enough to stand against the siren call of the great deceiver is a great comfort, on the one hand; on the other, it is disconcerting for us. How is it that we, who know considerably less scripture, are supposed to stand against such cunning?

Jesus is able to use scripture to confound the devil because he makes a more faithful use of it than the devil, the great deceiver himself. The devil uses the word to achieve a terrible end: to get Jesus to disobey his Father and throw all of creation into chaos.

Jesus answered those temptations with a quotation from the Old Testament. We need resources to fight the testings and temptations in our lives. We know from experience that it is helpful to have the inner Presence and Power of God within.

In the Scriptures, we hear that God's Word and Wisdom strengthen us. Phrases from the Bible, lines from the Bible and

verses from the Bible live in us and shape our inner values and attitudes. Sometimes, without even realizing it, the way we handle situations is affected by the inner Word of God living within.

We, as Christians, often ask the question: “What would Jesus do?” Christians wear bracelets with those initials imprinted on the bracelet: WWJD? WWJD, if not imprinted on a bracelet that we wear, is often deeply imprinted in our hearts. We are forever asking what would Jesus do in this situation.

Rather than quote the Scripture, today we Christians often quote the life of Christ as our primary resource for handling inner temptations.

Jesus faced a time of testing and we Christians certainly face times of testing. Evil things happen to good people, and we all face times of testing.

The power of evil is forever testing us to draw us away from God. The power of evil wants to destroy and kill us physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Evil wants to destroy our faith in God, our faith in each other, our good values, our good marriages, good families, our good communities, our good nations and any goodness of God living inside of us.

The power of evil tests us in order to see what quality of genuine faith lives inside of our hearts.

We all know the numerous tests of life: a sudden battle with cancer, a heart attack, a loss of our child, war, starvation, hunger, financial collapse, marital collapse. The list goes on and on.

We as Christians are always faced with the power of evil testing us to see if we will crumble and curse God, forget God, not draw on God, and gradually let go of God. That is what the story of Job was about in the Old Testament.

The devil was and is representative of the whispering power of temptation that lives in all human beings.

God allows us to be tested. God allows us to be tempted. That is the way life is. We know from our real life experiences that we face testing and temptation every day.

The power of evil also tempts us. The power of evil knows where we are most vulnerable and “weakest” and often tempts us at those points of our personal life. The Apostle Paul refers to these weaknesses as “the flesh.” Greed, money, success, sex, pride, gluttony, self- righteousness, complacency. The list is endless.

The Bible also teaches that the power of God is much stronger than the power of evil in our lives. Sometimes, we human beings overly emphasize how strong the power of evil is. We Christians sometimes forget that God’s power is much stronger than the power of evil in our personal lives or national lives.

If we have a willing and obedient heart as He did and have committed the Word of God to memory as He did, God can show us the path to follow.

It is just that simple, it is just that hard.