



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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In the Wilderness St. Matthew 4:1-11

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Fasting isn't fun. Really. I've never met anyone who thinks that fasting is fun, which is why so many people dread the coming of Lent—and I often secretly suspect that the folks who don't dread it aren't really observing it with fasting. And yet as much as no one likes to fast, we Christians are called to find joy in it—and I know many Christians who *do* find joy in it. I'm not sure if I have a "favourite" season of the year, but I always do find myself looking forward to Lent, because each year during these forty days I'm reminded to let go of myself, to let go of everything in life that is not Jesus, and to grab hold of him in trusting faith for grace. In the end that's what it's about—it's about *grace*. Each season of the year teaches us something about grace, but Lent in particular reminds us most profoundly of our deep need of grace. We're reminded that there is nothing we can do to earn God's love. We're reminded that there is nothing we can do to earn his forgiveness. We're reminded that all our works apart from Jesus are worth nothing and earn us nothing. And so we repent of it all, turning aside from everything, giving it all up, and take hold of Jesus. And in that we ought to find great peace. He makes us new. He makes all things new. And in that paradoxical act of humble repentance—of being reminded of our sin, of being reminded that we are dust and to dust we shall

return—we suddenly find ourselves enveloped in grace and full of joy, because in Jesus our sins are forgiven and in Jesus we're given life. And then in hindsight we realise—or we ought to realise—that everything we found so hard to give up, everything we were clinging to so tightly, all the things that we thought we'd be so miserable without have nothing to compare with the riches of God's kingdom and of life in Jesus.

Our Gospel lesson today reminds us that even Jesus himself struggled with these temptations. Yes, he was God, but in taking on our flesh in the Incarnation he became just as human as you and I. The things of the world, the things of this age had a pull on him just as they do on us. The world the flesh and the devil enticed Jesus as much as they do us. In walking the path of the Messiah—the path of the greatest sacrifice ever known to a human being—Jesus felt the same call of the world, telling him, "Only a fool gives up his life for strangers. Only a fool gives up his life for his enemies." But Jesus walked the way of sacrifice because he had a clear understanding of the way of the kingdom. He knew what he'd been sent to do. He knew what his Father had planned and he saw the joy that would result and the joy of doing his Father's will—he knew that by his sacrifice fallen creation would be renewed and restored. The season of Lent gives us an annual reminder that we are called to follow Jesus in faith, giving up and turning aside from everything that is opposed to his kingdom. Jesus knew it would be hard. The present age has a tight grip on us. And so he exhorts us over and over to live in faith and to live in

hope—to live with him and with his kingdom always before us. The writer of the book of Hebrews exhorts us:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who *for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.* (Hebrews 12:1-2)

"Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." Jesus knew how difficult is. He knew how much the Lord calls us to give up and to sacrifice. And the answer is to look to Jesus. Our faith is in him and he not only ran the race, enduring the cross for our sake, but as agonising, shameful, and humiliating as it was, he endured it all for the joy to be found the other side of it all—the joy found in making God's creation new, the joy found in redeeming sinful men and women from death.

The Gospel lesson today shows us Jesus leading the way. The way Matthew tells the story puts emphasis on Jesus as the new Adam and especially on Jesus as the new Israel. The previous scene in Matthew's Gospel is Jesus as the Jordan river where he's baptised by John. In his baptism Jesus enters the waters and in doing so he identifies himself with the people and as comes out of the water the Lord commissions him for his ministry as the Messiah. Matthew—and Luke too—tell the story in a way that forms a natural parallel with the story of Israel.

Passing through the waters of the Jordan was Jesus' Red Sea experience. And from the Jordan Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness on the other side, just as the Israelites were led by the Lord, a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, from the Red Sea into the wilderness. As Israel spent forty years in the wilderness, Jesus spends a symbolic forty days and forty nights there. Look at Matthew 4:1-3:

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

Jesus was hungry—the natural consequences of fasting for forty days. But there was nothing to eat. It was the desert—nothing but rocks. And in Jesus' hunger the devil came to him and drew his attention to all those rocks. Many of them no doubt looked more than a little like loaves of bread. And he said, "If you're really the Son of God, turn these stones into bread."

The devil was trying to get Jesus to reject the commitment he made public in his baptism. In the Jordan, as John baptised him, Jesus had declared his commitment to God's plan—to follow his Father and the Spirit as they led him down the path of redemption for humanity. Jesus showed his obedience and his own faith as he followed the Spirit's leading into the wilderness. He knew there was no food there, he knew what the wilderness was like, and he knew he was going to be hungry. But in

following the Spirit, he trusted his Father to provide one way or another. The devil now tempts him to abandon that faith. The Spirit had led Jesus to the wilderness and the devil now tempts Jesus to transform the wilderness—to defeat the Spirit's purpose for bringing him there. But in doing that, Jesus would be exchanging God's plan for his own and rejecting God's promise of provision. And so Jesus responds, quoting Deuteronomy 8:3.

But he answered, "It is written, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

Jesus appeals to the sermon that Moses preached to the Israelites as they were preparing to march into Canaan:

And you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. (Deuteronomy 8:2-3)

There was a reason why the Lord allowed the Israelites to be hungry: it demonstrated their faith in his provision. Were they willing to trust him even when it meant hardship? The Lord taught them that there's more to life than bread.

Bread feeds our bodies, but what good is the body if the soul is lost to sin and death through disobedience? The Israelites had failed that test, grumbling against Moses and wanting to go back to the fleshpots of Egypt. Now, as he hungers in the wilderness where the Spirit has led him, Jesus passes the test as he says "No!" to temptation. He trusts his Father to provide where he has led and shows that he knows that obedience to God's call is more important than physical comforts and even life itself. If he can't endure fasting, how can he endure the cross? And Brothers and Sisters, if we can't endure fasting, how can we expect to live sacrificially as Jesus calls us to live, giving up everything that is not him in faith as we look forward to the kingdom?

Back to Matthew: The devil tries again, taking a different tack.

Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you," and "On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'" (Matthew 4:5-6)

The devil now leads Jesus to the highest point in Jerusalem and tempts him to do something stupid as a way of forcing God into displaying his power through a spectacular rescue that everyone would see. "Jesus, if you're the Son of God, prove it to everyone with a big show."

Rejection was to be a constant theme of Jesus ministry. This was part of Jesus' sacrifice. The Son of God came to save Israel, but most of Israel rejected him. Now Matthew foreshadows Jesus' final test at the cross. There he was, the Son of God, but rejected finally by the people. He could have proved it to them by using his power to save himself, to come down from the cross in a great show of power and glory. But that wasn't his Father's plan and if he'd done that, the world certainly would have known who he was, but again there would have been no redemption from sin. Jesus would be king, we would still be dead.

The devil quotes two passages from Psalm 91. It's a psalm about the Lord's protection. What the devil quotes to Jesus from the psalm sounds good, but he leaves out some other important parts of the same psalm that qualify God's provision for his people. The first two verses of the psalm read:

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."

The shelter of the Most High is a wonderful place to find oneself, but to live under his protection requires that we first abide in his shadow. He is our "refuge and fortress", but we put ourselves in his care as we trust in him. In verse 14 the Lord says,

Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him;

I will protect him, because he knows my name.

"Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him." Jesus later said, "If you love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). We show our love for God as we live in faith, as we trust in him and walk in obedience. The devil loves to pluck portions of Scripture out of context in order to twist their meaning, reminding us of God's promises of blessing and care, while neglecting to remind us of the need for faith, for holiness, and for obedience. He quotes Scripture to put our attention on the short-term, while leaving out the bits that give us eternal perspective. And so Jesus refuses the devil's short-term blessings, knowing that through obedience, through humility, and even through suffering, greater blessing will be poured out on all humanity.

Jesus rebukes Satan with the words of Deuteronomy 6:16.

Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Where Israel had failed, Jesus is obedient. Brothers and Sisters, are we willing to live our lives with the long-term in view and sacrifice what often look like short-term blessings? Are we willing to lose our lives for the sake of Jesus and an eternal inheritance?

The devil makes on last attempt at dragging Jesus away from the path to the cross. Look at verses 8 and 9:

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the

world and their glory. And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

Jesus knew that the Messiah's kingdom was to be universal and eternal. Gabriel had announced to Mary: "He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:33). When the Father had spoken at Jesus' baptism, he had spoken words from Psalm 2 where we also read of the great King:

Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possessions. (Psalm 2:8)

Jesus knew his destiny as the King, but he also knew that the path to his throne was not going to be an easy one. The devil now offers him a shortcut, but it's a shortcut that bypasses the heart of the Messiah's ministry. The Messiah's path will be a hard one because he's called to restore fallen humanity as part of the process of ushering in his kingdom. The Messiah is to restore fallen humanity so that heaven may one day be manifest on earth. (Genesis portrays the Creation as God's cosmic temple, but what's the point of restoring the temple if there are no priests to serve in it? What's the point of being a king if you have no kingdom?) You see, the devil's shortcut offers no redemption. Instead of ruling heaven on earth, Jesus would be ruling over a sort of hell on earth. In bowing the knee to the devil, he'd be selling his birthright as the Son of God and instead becoming a son of Satan. He'd be no better off than the people he came to redeem.

Remember that in the wilderness, the Lord had commanded Israel:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.... It is the Lord your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear. You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are around you—for the Lord your God in your midst is a jealous God. (Deuteronomy 4-5, 13-15a)

Israel had failed. Even in the wilderness, while Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, Aaron had led the people as they made and worshiped the golden calf. Most of Israel's history was marked by the worship of foreign gods. But Jesus responds to the devil's temptation with the command God had given through Moses:

**“Be gone, Satan! For it is written,
“You shall worship the Lord your God
and him only shall you serve.”**
(Matthew 4:10)

Where Israel failed, Jesus overcomes temptation. He chooses the hard path of obedience that will bring not only kingship, but also redemption.

There are three temptations here and they all come from the devil, but they parallel the three source of temptation we swear off in our Baptism: the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world...and the sinful desires of the flesh. The devil begins by tempting Jesus with the flesh.

There's nothing sinful about satisfying your hunger by eating, but the devil tempted Jesus to satisfy his need by abandoning God's plan. He tempted Jesus with the pomp and glory of the world, promising him power and authority. Again, power and authority were Jesus' destiny—and he knew it—but not this way. The devil was tempting him to take a shortcut, bypassing God's plan to get him to the throne. And the devil tempted Jesus with himself: “Worship me and I'll give you your kingdom!” How often does the devil come to us, tempting us and asking for our worship? He comes to us in the guise of money and sex or pride and honour.

Harry Emerson Fosdick gave us a prayer in the form of a hymn:

*Shame our wanton, selfish gladness
Rich in things and poor in soul.
Grant us wisdom, grant us
courage,
Lest we miss thy kingdom's goal.*

How often do we find our gladness—our joy and happiness and pride—in “things”? And how often are we rich in things precisely because we've only got hold of Jesus with one hand—or maybe because we've let go of him almost entirely? How have we invested ourselves and found our joy in the values of the present age and, as a result, missed the kingdom's goals—as Jesus would have had he succumbed to the devil instead of being obedient to the Word of his Father?

Brothers and Sisters, this is why we need Lent. On the surface Lent may look like it's about sin and sorrow and dust and ashes, but if we understand the nature of grace

we can see the joy that lies in the dust and ashes for those who have been baptised—who have followed Jesus through the water and been born anew in the Holy Spirit. Like Israel, in passing through the water we gave up—we were freed by the Lord from an old life of slavery and bondage. But in the midst of the wilderness, sometimes we lose sight of the new life of freedom he's given and we allow ourselves be drawn back to the old life we've left behind. And so we need Lent. We need this reminder that the way to glory and the way to life are the way of sacrifice made possible by the Holy Spirit and by grace, by faith, and by hope. Jesus has prepared the way for us. He's opened the door to forgiveness and life, but the only way to get there is to follow in his footsteps: to give up, to let go of, to sacrifice our all and to grab hold of him in faith with both hands. Is it hard? Yes. Is it unpleasant? Yes, it often is. And yet think of Jesus, who endured the cross for the joy that he saw on the other side. This is the way of servanthood that leads to glory and to life—not merely *a* way, but *the* way, the *only* way.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, for our sake you fasted forty days and forty nights: give us grace so to discipline ourselves that our flesh being subdued to the Spirit, we may always obey your will in righteousness and true holiness, to the honour and glory of your name; for you live and reign with the Father and Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.