

Psalm 92:1-2, 9-16

*It is good to give thanks to the LORD,
to sing praises to your name, O Most High;
to declare your steadfast love in the morning,
and your faithfulness by night,
For your enemies, O LORD,
for your enemies shall perish;
all evildoers shall be scattered.*

*But you have exalted my horn like that of the
wild ox;
you have poured over me fresh oil.
My eyes have seen the downfall of my
enemies;*

*my ears have heard the doom of my evil
assailants.*

*The righteous flourish like the palm tree,
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.
They are planted in the house of the LORD;
they flourish in the courts of our God.
In old age they still produce fruit;
they are always green and full of sap,
showing that the LORD is upright;
he is my rock, and there is no
unrighteousness in him.*

Luke 4:1-13 (NRSV)

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone."'

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."'

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,

*"He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you",*

and

*"On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."'*

Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." ' When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

The Word of the Lord...

Paying attention to Lent is still relatively new to me. Although I grew up in an area with a strong Catholic influence, as a Presbyterian this had little effect on me. It was years until I figured out that the public school only served fish or cheese pizza once a week in order to help the majority of my fellow students avoid meat on Fridays.

This was New Jersey suburbia in the 1980's where hair height and collar starch seriously mattered; religious denominations – not so much. The largest theological discussion came around a lunch table when a pack of those Hostess cupcakes were being passed around and a friend said no thank you, because she was giving chocolate up for Lent. Ever helpful, I promptly invited her to become Presbyterian, because I never heard of us having to give up anything!

Thus ended my career in evangelism.

Although the Protestant church has embraced Lent more so recently, here is a brief tutorial if need be:

- Lent is a 40 day period leading up to Easter in the Christian liturgical calendar.
- This 40 days does not include Sundays, which are always celebrations of the resurrection of the Lord (remember, every morning is Easter morning...).
- The timing of Lent was decided by a Church Council in the year 325 that chose to standardize the date of Easter, by establishing it on the first Sunday after the full moon after March 21 (the vernal equinox). Lent, of course, begins forty days (plus Sundays) before that. In the interest of full disclosure, please put me in the camp of people that would prefer it if it was more permanent than that – how about the third Sunday of April.

I digress. Two more things about Lent:

- In early Christianity those days of Lent were used to instruct those who wanted to become Christians, culminating in their baptism on Easter Sunday.
- The practice of fasting during Lent started in ancient Christendom. Meat, eggs and dairy products through the middle ages and even now are given up through the forty days, with many taking a Sabbath from denial on Sunday. And also (at least where I grew up) on St. Patrick's Day.

In general, Protestants consider giving up something for Lent a personal choice. There has even been a trend of late to pick up a good habit, rather than try to dispel a bad one. The choice is ours and as one periodical from our denomination put it: "If giving up stuff raises spiritual consciousness and serves as an aid to prayer, to meditation on dying and rising with Christ, and to reclaiming one's baptism, go for it! Fasting, undertaking some other spiritual discipline, or giving up something are simply means toward the end of deepening the spiritual life. If it's just a pain, makes one feel like a martyr, or contributes to a sense of spiritual superiority – then it's better not to do it."¹

I'm not sure if it goes back to my moment in the high school cafeteria reveling in the extra Hostess Ho Ho's, but I've never been too keen on giving up or taking on just for the purposes of more enlightenment for Lent. One year I did try to give up sarcasm.... **THAT** went well.

Whether giving something up, taking something on - or not – Lent is 40 days. That 40 days is largely because of the story we read this morning, this time from Luke but it is in Matthew and

Mark as well. For some of us it's become a fairly familiar text. Jesus is tempted by Satan. Jesus rejects Satan. Satan leaves Jesus alone.... until a more opportune time.

In some ways the impact of this story is ruined for us because not only have we heard it repeatedly, but we know the ultimate ending. It's depicted in all of its glory in a stained glass window on your left. The Son of God took on our sin and because he never sinned we are saved and redeemed.

Wait... here's a nugget that I think can help us in our own day to day decisions and choices. It is true, that Jesus did not sin. BUT, Jesus was fully capable of sin. So this give and take with Satan was not just for show; this was genuine, brutal temptation and not just his life, but our lives were on the line.

There are certain things that mark a temptation as legit. First, it has to be accessible. If I truly wanted to test myself for Lent I would give up something I could actually have. That is why food fits in the category of temptation. If I gave up hot air ballooning for Lent, I dare say I would not be tempted at all to break that vow. I have no access to hot air ballooning. Which brings me to the siren song of temptation, the thing that makes temptation the evil that it is. Temptation is not about our weakness, but rather our power. Preacher and teacher Fred Craddock writes, "temptation is an indication of strength, not of weakness. We are not tempted to do what we cannot do but what is within our power."²

The temptations thrown at Jesus hit both of these marks – accessibility and power - and they also contain a third – they are justifiable. They make sense. "The devil's challenges to Jesus are not to do bad things. The first, to turn a stone into a loaf of bread, would assuage his hunger after the long fast. By implication, if he can do that, he can also turn the abundant stones that cover Israel's landscape into ample food to feed the many hungry people in a land often wracked by famine."³

The second test offers the authority to rule the kingdoms of the world. "Remember that most of the known world in Luke's day was under the heavy-handed control of Rome and its economic, administrative and military empire. Surely a 'regime change' can only be for the world's good!"⁴

The table has been perfectly set by a conniving force of evil. Jesus is on the cusp of beginning his public ministry. He has been baptized and Scripture tells us: *the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased* (Luke 3:21-22).

Jesus is ripe for the picking and Satan knows it, with most language experts believing that Satan's opening line to Jesus is actually, "**Since you are the Son of God...**"

Since you are the Son of God...

Sadly, this is where we too often stop listening. Since Jesus is the Son of God, he can get out of this temptation jam. Jesus can just do his 'Son of God' magic and either respond to Satan or get out of it. There is nothing here for us.

Except for this...

Jesus does not respond when tested with some Son of God mumbo-jumbo that only the Messiah could understand. Jesus responds with what he learned in the Synagogue, at the knee of his very human teachers, in Sabbath School. All of the responses from Jesus are from Deuteronomy, citing who we are called to be as human beings.

Is it possible that his identity as Son of God is intimately tied to being fully human? This means that when we sin, we are actually being in-humane – less human. Full humanity is experienced when we do not sin.

⁵At the very core of temptation, is the battle for our soul where if we succumb, we cease to be who God has created and called us to be. We cease to be fully human. This is what Jesus was tempted to do. And we get to witness as Jesus resisted not by being clever, not by being strong, not by inventing any new theological ideas, but by remembering some old creeds from Deuteronomy (and) by believing and quoting the script that God has provided for him. The same script that God has provided for us.

- Life is more than the pursuit of our own needs.
- We are to worship and serve God alone.
- It is not for us to test God.

Do not leave the script.

"Tom (Long) told a story of a high school play in which he was a backstage participant. He said that he remembered the months of rehearsal that went into that play, the endless coaching, and particularly the young English teacher who poured herself into that play. Day after day she worked hard to ensure the play's success, and the students in the production fell in love with her. She was the kind of teacher all of us have had at least once in our lives and have never forgotten.

The opening night for the play finally came, Tom said, and everyone was ready. The auditorium was packed. There was electricity in the house. The curtain went up on the first act and everything went beautifully. It was a comedy and almost every line seemed to bring down the house. The audience was really into the play.

In the second act, however, one of the actors forgot one of his lines. There was a moment of paralysis on the stage. The other actors knew it; the audience hadn't realized it yet, but the cast knew. Here was a young actor looking around as if to imply, 'what is my line?' The English teacher/directors was about to whisper the line when he suddenly spoke... It wasn't his line, Tom said; he had made it up on the spot. But it was funny, and the audience responded with

laughter. Everyone was relieved. They had gotten out of a jam and now could get on with the play.

But with the laughter still ringing in his ears, the young man made up another line. It wasn't quite as funny as the first, but it was still a little funny and the audience laughed. So, he made up another. And another. The other actors were trying their best to keep up with him, to maneuver around what he was saying, but the play was out of control. And now, even the audience was aware, and there wasn't any more laughter.

Tom said he couldn't remember how they got out of it, or even if they got out of it. All he remembers, he said, is looking over at that young English teacher who had poured her time and life into theirs, looking out at the stage, and weeping.⁶

"God has given us our lines. If we will learn them, we will have the resources we need to remember who we are and what we are about, and the strength to contend against all temptation."⁷

There is a battle going on – of life against death, hope against despair – a battle between God's way and the world's way, and it is real. Our character, our values, are constantly being shaped and reshaped by how we respond to the temptations that are daily before us to rise or to sink, to choose God's way or the world's way.⁸

- Life is more than the pursuit of our own needs.
- We are to worship and serve God alone.
- It is not for us to test God.

We have the script. The choice is ours.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ www.pcusa.org/ideas/springo4/faqlent.hetm

² Fred Craddock. "Luke" *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: Jon Knox Press, 1990). p. 56.

³ David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. *Feasting on the Word*. Year C, Volume 2. Sharon H. Ringe (Exegetical Perspective). p. 47.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Major credit for this sermon and the themes within goes to the Reverend Dr. Anna P. Straight. *1st Lent, February 21, 2010*. The Well, 2009. Austin, TX.

⁶ Long, "Facing Up to Temptation," preached March 12, 1989 at the Westminster Presbyterian Church, Charleston, South Carolina.

⁷ Bob Dunham. University Presbyterian Church, Chapel Hill, North Carolina. *Moveable Feast Paper*, 1995.

⁸ Barbara Brown Taylor. *Bread of Angels* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1997), p. 36.