

Jesus' Victory for Holiness...and Ours

The First Sunday in Lent. Year C, RCL. The Temptation of Jesus in the Desert according to Luke (4:1-13). February 14, 2016. The Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem, and Trinity, Alliance, in the Episcopal Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

The story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, particularly as told in the Gospel according to Luke, serves as the prototype for the season of Lent as it has developed in the Christian tradition.

Now, the Sundays that fall within Lent, even though we give them a Lenten tone, are always celebrations of Jesus' resurrection. So they don't count, strictly speaking, as part of Lent. If you start on Ash Wednesday and count the days through Holy Saturday, just before Easter, and then subtract the Sundays that fall within that span of time, you get forty days. That's how long Lent lasts. And, of course, Jesus' temptation in the wilderness lasts forty days. Forty days, forty months, forty years—forty whatever—is a standard length for a long ordeal in the Hebrew tradition out of which Jesus was operating.

Jesus fasts during his forty-day ordeal in the desert. That is, he deliberately denies himself food intake. Luke says he “ate nothing at all,” which shows his divine nature (his human nature is shown by contrast: usually he *did* eat). Most human beings can not go without food for more than a few days, and even then we must keep drinking water. But we can cut back, or go without certain foods (which is

called *abstaining* from those foods), and that is what fasting is for us: the systematic and deliberate reduction or restriction of our food intake for the purpose of honoring God. It's a spiritual discipline, a form of prayer really, since it's a way of drawing closer to God, a way of paying better attention to him. I've encountered people who at the end of a three-day total fast (they were drinking water, of course) were spiritually radiant. But don't try that without working up to it!

So Jesus, who has just been granted through baptism the empowerment of the Holy Spirit for his public ministry, has gone off on a forty-day fasting retreat in the desert. Why? To draw closer to God the Father. He's already the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, but because he's also a complete human being he needs to develop his fellowship with the other two Persons the way a human being would, and this involves spiritual disciplines that we, too, can undertake. We can assume he has done this sort of thing before; you don't undertake a heavy-duty fasting retreat without preparation. But this is the biggie, the one his thirty years of pious living have been working up to. Beginnings are important—you've heard me say that before—and this is the beginning of the part of Jesus' life we all know about, his three years (or thereabouts) of teaching, healing and preaching.

The devil knows this is the biggie, too. He knows human beings are vulnerable when they are physically stressed and concerned about how they are going to handle something really huge that's looming up in their lives. So he weighs in

on Jesus while Jesus is preparing himself in the desert for his public ministry. So far in his life, Jesus has not sinned; but the devil knows beginnings are important. If he can corrupt Jesus at the beginning of his public ministry, he can throw the whole thing off track.

So the devil deploys the three standard categories of temptation: pleasures, possession, and power. And, as he always does, he deploys them in ways calculated to get the attention of the particular person being tempted.

Let's listen to the first temptation again: "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."'"

The message here is that appetites, traditionally called the pleasures of the flesh, are okay in themselves; they are the way God designed us to be motivated to maintain our lives by eating, drinking, procreating and so on. But they are supposed to be used the right way: not to excess and toward good ends. Jesus knows that his heavenly father does not want to heal the world by overturning the usual workings of nature on a regular basis. Jesus was not here to feed the world—or himself—by producing food out of rocks. Miracles always have a teaching function. What would turning a stone into a loaf of bread teach? That only the son

of God gets to eat when the chips are down, or that we should wait around for God to alter the laws of nature to accommodate our appetites. No, Jesus was there to give his life away for the renewal of the universe, not force the universe to alter itself to meet his needs. That shows *us* the way to handle our appetites, too. And the way to train ourselves not to give in to fleshly appetites is to practice, systematically, denying ourselves those kinds of gratification. That is what is meant by **fasting**, and that is why Lent traditionally involves systematically giving something up that gives us pleasure.

Temptation number two: “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.”’”

The glory and the authority that the devil has claimed are gifts from God, on loan to his creatures, you might say; they are meant to be used rightly. But a selfish focus on status and wealth is the ruin of good stewardship. It would be fun to have all that stuff the devil promised, and to use it to relieve suffering and injustice. Indeed, that’s what Jesus’ disciples would expect him to do, more or less. It turned out to be very difficult for them to grasp how radical was Jesus’ rejection of the world’s distorted way of doing things.

What we call “worldliness” is the corruption of God’s good creation through selfishness. The antidote to relying on physical possessions (wealth of all kinds) and social possessions (status) is **almsgiving**: giving away our stuff, our time, our influence. Jesus refused all temptations to wealth and status, which did not seem very kingly to the people of his time, but it certainly wears well from the standpoint of godliness. In the end Jesus gave away his most precious possession, his very self, for the life of the world. That (gulp!) is the standard. To train ourselves according to that standard really does start with baby steps, like putting pennies in a UTO mite box, or giving a few bucks for the relief of Haiti. I’ve thought (and taught) for many years that rather than just give something up for Lent (to train ourselves in handling our appetites) we should give something away (to train ourselves in handling possessions). We need possessions in order to do good things, God knows we need them, and God knows how to help us learn to handle them right.

Temptation number three: “Then the devil took [Jesus] 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.”

Human beings, as I often say, are relentlessly social, and the way selfishness corrupts human interaction is by putting influence and status ahead of generosity, kindness, and the delight in doing something because it is a good thing to do, not just because we'll get something out of it. We like to have our own way, and it isn't just a social thing; we like to make nature dance to our tune too. All that is the temptation of power, and it is counteracted by **prayer**: in prayer we draw near to God, honor God's lordship over all things, seek God's wisdom, trust God's righteous and unlimited capacities for creative activity ahead of our corrupt and incomplete capabilities. And if Jesus is to be truly God and perfectly human, he must win our trust without overwhelming our free will by indulging himself in spectacular displays of power, like getting angels to serve as his elevator down from the pinnacle of the Temple. You and I know how damaging to relationships it can be to use raw power to force people to do things. God wants to guide, encourage and empower, not nag, coerce and overwhelm; that's why God allows us so much scope in how and even whether we respond to his call to get to know him through prayer.

Prayer is self-giving, not self-aggrandizing, though (as those who pray know) we do get so something out of it: we get changed in a Godward direction, which has all sorts of benefits for the life of the world that worldliness knows nothing of. Jesus' kingdom is not of this world, that is, it stands in judgment against the world's emphasis on pleasures, possessions and power, so Jesus is not going to wage his kingdom by worldly standards. Neither should

we. And to train ourselves in that direction during Lent, besides giving up a pleasure and taking on an act of generosity, perhaps we should practice a particular prayer discipline.

Fasting, almsgiving, prayer; they work to beat temptation. They worked for Jesus in the desert.

By means of self-denial (fasting), by means of almsgiving (the habit of giving himself away—putting his whole life on the line), and by means of prayer (the steady intention of placing himself close to the Father in the power of the Spirit), Jesus in the desert overcame the best temptations the devil could throw at him. But the devil knew something else was coming. Jesus was completely human, which meant he would not live forever in the world of time and space as it currently existed. He would have to die. And when he was facing that, the ultimate moment of laying down his earthly life—the ultimate moment of self-denial and self-giving—he would be vulnerable again. Human beings are designed to preserve and maintain life, including our own; that is a good thing built into us by God. But because of sin, we also fear death; we fear the pain and loss that goes with it, and we tend not to trust God for a good outcome in so extreme a situation. As his earthy ministry draws to a closed, Jesus will be vulnerable as never before when he confronts his own mortality. So the devil departs from him until “an opportune time,” or as we might say nowadays, until a window of vulnerability.

That window of vulnerability will come in the Garden of Gethsemane, an occasion we commemorate on Good Friday, at the end of Lent. The devil will weigh in with everything he's got and try to tempt Jesus to despair: "It's all for nothing, boy! Why bother? What's the point? They're all going to desert you! The kingdom of Heaven is a sham. You haven't achieved anything but a blip on the radar of eternity. You'll have died for nothing and it'll be the same-old, same-old forever."

But Jesus, despite genuine and awful pain, will settle his will in the inner peace of his Heavenly Father, offer his battered mind and body to the power of the Holy Spirit, and walk all the way to the Cross. Throughout Lent the pattern is for us to walk with Jesus in the desert through self-denial (fasting), self-giving (almsgiving) and prayer. We are to be aware of the very special tailor-made temptations in our lives that are inviting us to misuse pleasures, possessions and power. We are to walk all the way to the Cross, trusting God step by step, attending (as Jesus did) to Holy Scripture and all the spiritual techniques, the best practices of holy living, that can help us walk the walk through death to everlasting life in God's grace.

I'm sorry to have to admit that the church tradition most of us grew up in has been pretty hit and miss about equipping us in any kind of depth with a full and useful experience of Holy Scripture and all those spiritual practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. The teaching ministry of the Episcopal Church has not totally dropped the ball or none of us would care enough about holy living to be here

listening to this, but really, how many of you have heard of *lectio divina* or the thirty-day Ignatian desert experience? Or constructing a spiritually-based rule of life? A few of us, maybe. And there's so much more!

But it's best to focus on a bit at a time. This Lent, with the help and support of our diocese, the parishes of the shared ministry of Salem and Alliance are offering group learning and practice in crafting a rule of life. This is a tool that helps tune the Christian life to God. And, as I promised when first I came among you, I will highlight other tools of holy living from time to time. No one, including God himself, can force anyone to pick up a good tool and use it. But when we develop a taste for the things of God, the alternatives increasingly seem like so much dust drifting in the desert.

❖ This sermon is a modification of the one preached on the First Sunday in Lent on February 21, 2010.