

Sermon Luke 4: 1-13 First Sunday of Lent

Now Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wild. For forty wilderness days and nights He was tested by the Devil. He ate nothing during those days, and when the time was up He was hungry. The Devil, playing on His hunger, gave the first test: "Since You're God's Son, command this stone to turn into a loaf of bread." Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy: "It takes more than bread to really live." For the second test the Devil led Jesus up and spread out all the kingdoms of the earth on display at ones. Then the Devil said, "They're Yours in all their splendor to serve Your pleasure. I'm in charge of them all and can turn them over to whomever I wish. Worship me and they're Yours, the whole works." Jesus refused, again backing His refusal with Deuteronomy: "Worship the Lord your God and only the Lord your God. Serve God with absolute single-heartedness." For the third test the Devil took Jesus to Jerusalem and put Him on top of the Temple. He said, "If You are God's Son, jump. It's written, isn't it, that 'God has placed you in the care of angels to protect you; they will catch you; you won't so much as stub your toe on a stone'?" "Yes," said Jesus, "and it's also written, 'Don't you dare tempt the Lord your God.'" That completed the testing. The Devil retreated temporarily, lying in wait for another opportunity.

My interest in both Advent and Lent as underground, kind of subversive seasons, makes me wonder if I should have gone to work for the FBI instead of the church. I have a picture from the first church I served, where the senior pastor and the pastoral intern, both women, and I were posed as Charlie's Angels. I love these extraordinary, underground seasons of the church year, Advent and Lent, that invite a quiet, interior revolution in the human heart, and that happen simultaneously with either the celebration or the disregard of the culture around us. Both Advent and Lent invite us to go below the surface, to dive deeper into the spiritual life... to remember and celebrate - at the very least to accept - what the 19th century French Jesuit philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote, that "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience."

Lent is the 40 days leading up to Easter that mirror Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness being tested by the devil. After 40 days and nights of fasting Jesus was stripped down to the most basic human: defenseless and weak. Jesus was in fact

mirroring the human experience of suffering - not just on the cross - but here in the wilderness. Jesus understands suffering, temptation, and desperate craving because He's experienced it, and He can authentically be with us when we are suffering. Because it isn't a question of if we human beings will suffer... but when. And in times of suffering, in the wilderness, when we are tempted to turn to a quick fix and away from God, we need Jesus with us.

There's a wonderful quote from one of the Harry Potter movies where Harry is comforted by his friend Luna Lovegood. Harry thinks that no one believes him that Voldemort (JK Rowling's "devil," otherwise known as "He-who-must-not-be-named) has returned. Harry feels abandoned and alone. Luna says to him, "I suppose if I were You-Know-Who, I'd want you to feel cut off from everyone else. Because if it's just you alone you're not as much of a threat." When we suffer, when we find ourselves in the wilderness, when we are tested, we need Jesus with us, because if we think we are abandoned and alone... then we're vulnerable to the devil's lies that we *are* on our own, ignored, and unloved... God is not there. God is not anywhere.

It is possible of course to ignore Lent and its invitation to become spiritually stronger beings; to ignore these 40 days to prepare for the devil to test us with suffering, temptation, and desperate craving; to ignore the opportunity to stockpile both our knowledge of God and our experience of God's love and mercy, for times in the wilderness. But if we are following Jesus, if we are traveling with Him, then we need these seasons of intense and intentional learning and practice. Otherwise faith can be reduced to a slogan like "in God we trust" that on a coin is fairly meaningless, that we don't look at. Otherwise when suffering comes, and we find ourselves in the wilderness

and tempted by the devil, we become bitter, resentful, and closed off from love and forgiveness... and then it's easy to be seduced by the devil's lies that God doesn't care... that God isn't anywhere.

Lent is an invitation to repent (which means to turn around, to turn away from self-centeredness, self-importance, and self-reliance - that is, exaggerated dependence on ourselves alone, with no help needed from God or anyone else) and instead to turn to God with open, vulnerable hearts that need the tender love and fierce mercy God has for us... and for all the world.

Jesus knew who He was, God's beloved Son, and He knew scripture (not just the words but the intent of scripture, which is to help us know and love God, love and serve others, and see ourselves as Jesus did, as God's beloved daughters and sons.) Because of this knowledge, of God and of Himself, Jesus could withstand the torture of exhaustion, hunger, and the devil's attack. Lent is a time for us to resist the devil's lie that there is some-thing that can take the place of God, that can fill and satisfy the emptiness and the longing in us... that really only God can fill and satisfy. This a season to learn and practice what can bring us closer to God and to others... and to the understanding of who we are... God's beloved.

The start of Lent was Wednesday, which was Ash Wednesday. From the earliest times the church has observed Lent, although many of us who grew up in the Protestant church didn't know anything about it, because in the 16th century the observance of Lent was halted by the reformers who saw it as being a Catholic tradition (and therefore suspect.) But the earliest Christian writers refer to Lent as a time of spiritual preparation, of fasting, and of reconciliation. Some of us are unfamiliar with Lent and might view Ash

Wednesday with suspicion... but the ashes are a physical reminder of a spiritual truth: We were made from the dust of the earth and we'll return to the dust. We are not to see ourselves as too big or too little. We are, in fact, a paradox: created from the dust of the earth and also made in the image of God.

On Wednesday another United Methodist pastor and I took ashes to three BART stations. We went at noon, and there were very few people coming and going... we agreed that next year we need to be there in the morning during rush-hour. It was a long three hours that I stood at BART wearing my clergy stole, next to a sign that said, "Get Your Ashes Downtown." To everyone who walked by we offered ashes, smiles, and sometimes conversation. Finally at the Walnut Creek station a woman came up to Pastor Michele and pushed back her bangs to receive the ashes. After Michele made the sign of the cross on her forehead the woman began to weep. "Why did Jesus have to die?" she asked. "Why didn't He run away? Why didn't He save Himself?" Michele would answer one of the questions and the woman would nod and take a breath, but then the tears would flow and the questions would begin again. "I don't understand. Why did Jesus die? It isn't fair. Why didn't Pilate speak up? Why did Barabbas get to go free?" We could see that this woman, who knew scripture, who knew Jesus' story, had mental health issues. It was tempting to turn away (not physically but to stop listening, to stop trying to respond to her) but instead the Holy Spirit showed me someone whose heart was defenseless, someone who understood and related to Jesus' pain and suffering.

I wonder if the point of Lent is to become a person whose heart is defenseless against God's love and longing for us. I wonder if the Lenten practices of fasting, prayer,

forgiveness, and generosity, are ways for us to become simpler people, who are more vulnerable to the suffering of God and of others. Jesus, in the wilderness, was weak with hunger, vulnerable, a human stripped down to the most basic desires. But He was not unarmed... defenseless, vulnerable, but not unarmed. Jesus' armaments were self-knowledge (He knew Himself to be God's own); knowledge of God (He knew and understood and used scripture); and He knew He was not alone. These can be the tools we take into Lent and into times of being tested: knowing who we are, knowing, understanding, and using scripture, and believing that we are not alone.

I'm not a Calvinist, and I don't believe that everything that happens comes from the hand of God (which is a Calvinist and a fundamentalist belief.) I don't believe that God causes tragedy, brokenness, or disaster to teach, instruct, or punish humanity. But this is a fallen world and terrible things happen... and they can be times of testing by the devil and they can warp and bend us like pretzels... or we can allow God to use them to teach us, strengthen us and give us deep roots of trust and faith, and grow us tall like redwood trees.

Lent is a time of voluntarily entering into the wilderness of temptation and vulnerability, just as Jesus did. It's a time to look at a habit, at a mindset, at a belief, or a behavior that alienates us from God, from others, and from being who we were created to be: God's own, God's beloved sons and daughters. Jesus, in the wilderness, has shown us what we need to disarm the devil. When he was tested by the devil's tools of hatred, racism, fear, and injustice, Martin Luther King Jr. liked to quote Jesus: "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."

In the bulletin is an insert on how to practice Lent... these 40 days that mirror Jesus' 40 days of fasting and temptation that prepared Him for all that was to come. As we enter into a time of prayer please look for what can guide you through these 40 wilderness days, so that when Easter arrives you might know in a fresh, new, and startling way, that when Jesus rose from the grave - sin, death, defeat, hatred, even hell itself having no power over Him - when He rose... He brought you with Him into new life. Amen.