

Luke 4:1-13

Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent. Lent is forty days from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday, but not including Sundays. Every Sunday is a celebration of the resurrection, so they are not included. That's why it's technically the first Sunday IN Lent, not the first Sunday OF Lent. Who doesn't love a technicality? Since we are remembering Jesus' forty days of prayer, fasting, and self-denial in the wilderness, Lent is also a time when we observe those disciplines.

The forty days are of course a reminder of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness, which, in turn are a reminder of the forty years Israel spent in the wilderness. And in that time, they faced some of the same temptations Jesus did. Temptations like food, taking shortcuts, putting God to the test. But where Israel failed in the wilderness, Jesus will succeed. He is portrayed as the ideal Israelite, the one who succeeds where others failed. He is also portrayed as the New Adam, the Son of God who will succeed over temptations.

To be human is to be tempted. We are all tempted to rebel against God and seek our own way instead of God's way. If Jesus is to be truly God in human flesh, he must be tempted. And to be the author of salvation, he must succeed over temptation.

This time of testing comes just after his baptism and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It is the nature of temptation that it often comes especially after a "spiritual high point." I can speak from my own experience that some of the most tempting times in my life have come just after some of the best times. The prophet Elijah wanted to give up and die just after his victory over the prophets of Baal and Asherah. Great temptation came after a great victory.

"Then Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, was led by the Spirit into the wilderness." It is an erroneous way of thinking to imagine that if we are following the leading of God's Spirit, then we will be led into ease or comfort. God's purpose is our growth, our going on to maturity, not our comfort.

In the Scriptures, the wilderness is a place of testing and preparation. This wilderness is Jeshimon, the hot, dry, desolate region in between the Judean Highlands and the Dead Sea. It is an inhospitable environment. And it's also a very lonely place. Forty days of isolation from other people would be a difficult experience.

Jesus fasted all through these forty days, and he was hungry. Remember, the Gospel writer, Luke, is a physician. If he didn't tell us that, we wouldn't know Jesus was hungry, right? But seriously, temptations are often especially difficult when we are least

ready to meet them. The acronym I learned one time was HALT: “hungry, angry, lonely, tired.” Those are when temptations are most difficult. And Jesus is certainly hungry, lonely, and tired.

Satan comes to tempt Jesus. Satan is a created being, but he is a rebellious creature, seeking others who will join him in his rebellion. Three times Satan tempts Jesus, and each time Jesus responds with Scripture. The Word of God is our weapon against temptation. In order for us to defend ourselves, we must first know God’s word. And second, we must obey God’s word. Satan knows God’s Word, too, but he doesn’t obey it. And we need to be careful of misusing Scripture. In our rebellious nature, we often want to twist it to mean what we want it to mean. We should read Scripture for its “plain meaning.” I didn’t say “literal meaning,” because sometimes the plain meaning of Scripture is NOT literal! Jesus said, “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.” The plain meaning is that we shouldn’t do that literally. I always get a little on edge when someone says to me, “I believe every word of the Bible is literally true.”

The first temptation is the temptation to satisfy the desires of the body; to turn stones into bread. Obviously, there is nothing wrong with food. But Jesus wasn’t sent into the wilderness to eat. He was sent to fast and pray. A thing can be perfectly harmless, even be good for us, but it can be wrong in the wrong timing. Or a thing can be good for us, but only in moderation. If we have a problem with food as a society, it’s probably that whole moderation thing. Or maybe I’m just talking about me.... But Jesus succeeds. He values discipline over desire.

The second temptation is to “take a shortcut.” “Hey, Jesus, you want the whole world? I’ll give it to you. Just worship me.” This is the temptation of the right goal in the wrong way. Jesus’ path to kingship over the whole world is the path of the cross. Again, Jesus succeeds with the Word of God as his weapon.

The third temptation is to put God to the test. This time, Satan uses Scripture, but really, what he does is misuse Scripture. He quotes Psalm 91, which is about God’s providence, God’s protection and provision for us. But it’s not an invitation to presume things of God. Again, Jesus triumphs by the Word of God.

And Satan leaves. But he doesn’t quit. He just waits for a better opportunity.

Temptations come our way all through the year. But the purpose of Lent is to “build up our spiritual defenses.” By prayer, fasting, intentional acts of self-denial, and by reading God’s word, we are prepared by God’s Spirit to be more ready to defend ourselves when temptations come our way.