

## Lent 1 + March 10, 2019+ St. Michael's, Cookeville

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. On Ash Wednesday we began a 40 day opportunity for a spiritual tune-up! In church, Lent is a solemn season of remembering the Cross and the promise of eternal life. It is the time which we have been given the opportunity to explore, experience, and evolve in our own lives what it means to live in Christ.

One theologian said: "... *even though we are baptized, what we constantly lose and betray is precisely (what) we received at baptism. Therefore, Easter is our return every year to our own baptism, whereas Lent is our preparation for that return, the slow and sustained effort ... into (the) new life in Christ.*"

With the coming of Lent, we make a dramatic shift in the church's focus. Lent is a time to get back to basics of the faith. In the ancient church it was a time for reconciling those who had fallen away and for instructing new converts about the faith, followed by baptism on Easter. Each year Lent and Easter are a path of rediscovery towards coming home.

The tradition on this Sunday is to tell the story of Jesus in the wilderness, immediately after his baptism, the place where many throughout the Bible encountered God and discovered their true mission in life. The wilderness is a place of both discovery and temptation, and after Jesus has been there for 40 days, he meets the devil. From the text, we see that he is bold, cunning, clever, and powerful. The devil offers the promise of control paired with the suggestion that God is not sufficient to keep Jesus safe. In this scene, his tools are bread, power, and safety. But it could be anything. Because the point isn't the specific temptations, but rather the underlying nature of temptation itself.

At his baptism, Jesus is declared to be God's Beloved Son, in whom God is pleased. Those same words come into our story, but this time they are on the lips of Jesus' adversary, the devil. Twice the devil uses God's words to Jesus and calls them into question with his taunting, "If you are the Son of God..." then follows with specific tests to find out whether he is truly God's faithful son. The story contains three moments of testing, and all have to do with the identity of Jesus as Son of God, and what kind of Son will he be? Each of the temptations seeks to undercut Jesus' confidence in his relationship with God and undermine Jesus' identity. The temptations play on his hunger, fatigue, and self-esteem.

And I would argue that temptation is not always *toward* something – usually pictured as doing something you shouldn't do – temptation can also push us *away* from something: turning our backs on our health, our loved ones, our conscience, or our relationship with God and the values we have by being God's people.

But Jesus is too smart for this and remains faithful and focused. He knows he does not need to gain any of the things promised by the devil's temptations; he already has them. For him, the devil uses bread, power, and safety, but it might just as well have been youth, beauty, and wealth; or confidence, fame, and security. Most temptations come disguised as benefits.

Although we experience our own specific temptations, in another way they are all the same, because they seek to shift our hope, trust, and confidence away from God and toward some substitute that promises more secure (and often more tangible) rewards. One scholar says this story is really about identity theft, both Jesus' and ours.

Throughout Lent much is said about *prayer, penitence, and fasting* – this may need some explaining. **Prayer** is much more than words – it is about the intention to actually be in relationship

with God and to listen. It is an opening of the heart to God, to be receptive and honest, trusting that God seeks to love and guide us. It is also responding, about putting our will and our values into action, because we have come to greater clarity by seeking God's presence and perspective.

**Penitence** is more than just being sorry – that's the foundation upon which we are to build reconciliation or renewal, where we ask for forgiveness and seek to mend wounds we have caused or to forgive those caused to us. Forgiveness can be a slow and difficult process, and depending on the wound, requires us to disengage from the toxic effects of holding a grudge or seeking revenge. Penitence begins as deep honesty about who we are.

**Fasting** is all about making room, being open to what God might put in the place of what I have let go of. What if God and I could remove my spiritual obstacles for Lent: the distraction of my insecurities, anger or pride? Could I receive a new perspective on my past that would open up the future? What if I could begin to restore a damaged relationship or start a new one for Lent?

When I was growing up, most people seemed to give up some food they loved, or some bad habit they should get rid of anyway. In ancient times, having enough food was often a daily struggle, so fasting was a bigger sacrifice than it might seem to be today, when we can obtain food at will, 24 hours a day. On the other hand, we Americans are the most over-fed people in the world, so maybe fasting from food is still relevant. Other people take on a new habit or discipline – more exercise, reading their Bible, or joining the Lenten study program. These traditional practices can still be effective, but some desire a more meaningful focus.

So a modern fast may need to be something else – some try a fast from technology or social media, which is good if they are distractions for you. Others find unplugging from the news or TV "talking heads" a better discipline, one that helps clear our hearts of the anxiety and cynicism that is sold to us all the time. For others, it may be a fasting from their fretting, complaining, gossiping, or laziness. It might mean focusing on the needs of others and seeking ways to raise the spirits of someone who is struggling or alone. How about taking a walk instead of watching the news, enjoying the sunset without the *second* glass of wine; contacting distant family members instead of worrying over them, getting some exercise, studying Scripture, reading materials that feed the soul or the mind rather than just entertaining us?

Whatever the fast or the replacement, it is usually better when it comes from a place of longing or a place of need. Instead of being miserable about the world, find a way to volunteer. Instead of avoiding an unpleasant conversation or conflict, pray about how to find a way in or even a solution. If what we do connects us deeper to God or others, it makes Lent come alive.

But how much Lent do you actually need? Well, one way to measure that is to ask yourself things like, "What was the best thing I did last week?" And "What was the worst thing I did last week?" Then ask how big is the gap between how good you felt with the first and how bad you felt for the second. If the intensity is about the same, maybe you don't need as much Lent; but if the gap is wide – that you felt much more pleasure about the good and a lot less guilt about the bad, or if it was hard to feel much of anything at all for either one – then maybe your Lent needs to go deeper, and maybe the obstacles for you are greater.

And what about this church? How much Lent does St. Michael's need? If, as we hope, you are closer to a new rector, then what preparation might help you be ready? How much is the church willing to change in order to reach a new generation with the Gospel? And what are we unwilling to change? What are our obstacles or bad habits? This is the start of an important and

potentially fruitful conversation, to discover how we might put our mission ahead of tradition, or routine, ahead of the familiar or comfortable.

Lent has always been an ideal time to remind each other of God's love and grace poured out for us on the cross of Christ, with a promise of a new sort of life that becomes possible. The signs of this new life are in some ways the answers to the temptations – that yes, we are hungry, not for bread, but for God. Exploration and nourishment are the answer.

Another temptation is to embrace all the world can offer, and being willing to sell your soul for it. Bringing humility and vulnerability to our use of authority, power, and resources is an answer. Learning more about the pain and brokenness of the world also means learning how to love and sacrifice, realizing that we are tempted away from them constantly.

At the end of the story, Luke writes that the devil left Jesus, until "an opportune time," which means this is never a one-and-done activity. Because he is human like us, Jesus would be tempted again, and so will we. But this helps us enter Lent with a strong awareness of the full humanity of Jesus, knowing that he shared our life in all its joy and pain. God does not stand aloof in the midst of suffering and has Jesus to remind him of what a human life entails.

So our Lenten journey begins again. May it be one of honesty for each one of us. May it be one that expands our horizons and connects us with others. May our journey be grounded in our relationship with Jesus as both friend and savior, one that builds up our courage and faith. May it be one that helps us to learn that in Christ we are never powerless, but that in walking this road with him, we will learn more of his love and find ourselves renewed.