

First Lent: Lead Us Not Into Temptation

Luke 4:1-13 by Patty Friesen (March 10/19)

I have a refrigerator magnet that says Lead Me Not Into Temptation, I can find the way myself! Lent provides a 40-day season when we're invited to pay attention to our hunger, to those yearnings that move us toward healing and ultimately toward Easter's feasting. In Lent, we join Jesus in those 40 days in the wilderness.

Throughout the Bible, fasting is what God's people do when they are desperate to become more aware of God's presence. Fasting is how we use our body as a prayer. Isolated in the wilderness, Jesus fasts because he is a human with a body that he directs towards God's nearness. He knows there is a spiritual capacity that only manifests when heart and body are joined in humility before God. Christian spirituality never stays as an idea in the mind but always moves into the body, into the belly.

With belly growling and strength fading, Jesus refuses to gratify his natural impulses. He uses his gnawing hunger to place himself in a posture of attentiveness. Through his deprivation, Jesus connects to his deepest craving, awakens his most ravenous hunger. God. And Jesus will need all his spiritual alertness when the devil sallies up to him with temptations for Jesus. (Christian Century, Feb. 13/19).

Jesus' encounter with temptation or the devil is an important start to his ministry. If he didn't have this encounter with temptation to self-glory, he would never recognize it's face as it continually meets him along the way. Flannery O'Connor says a working knowledge of the devil can be well had from resisting him. Jesus gains knowledge and strength from this initial rumble with the devil that serves him well the rest of his short life. These temptations come after Jesus' baptism when God tells Jesus, You are my

Beloved Child.” The devil tells Jesus, “If you are God’s beloved, then prove it.” That’s how we will always recognize the devil - through doubting God’s love for us.

Through fasting, Jesus may be vulnerable physically for the temptation for bread but is strong spiritually. In fasting for 40 days, Jesus is in the tradition of Moses who fasted for 40 days on Mt. Sinai in the wilderness and Elijah who fasted for 40 days in the wilderness on Mount Horeb. Both Moses and Elijah appear in the Mount of Transfiguration that Terri Lynn preached on last Sunday as strong spiritual companions and guides for Jesus. Grounded in God’s love, Jesus responds - One does not live by bread alone but by every word of God’s. He will not perform a miracle for himself or the devil but in the needs of the 5000 will multiply loaves and turn water into wine. In this temptation - Jesus gains clarity and vision of his purpose in the world.

The second temptation is to control God. “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple and God will command the angels to catch you.” Jesus reminds the devil when Moses struck the rock to get water in the wilderness, that God’s hand will not be forced by human pride and will. Jesus doesn’t need to prove that God is with him. He remembers his baptism and that’s all the proof he needs of God’s care and presence.

The third enticement is to trade loyalty. “All these kingdoms I will give to you if you fall down and worship me,” the devil says but Jesus replies with the Jewish declaration of faith in Deuteronomy 5, the Shema, “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one. You shall have no other gods before me.” Jesus tells Satan, 3 strikes, you’re out. Jesus has claimed his power as God’s beloved and nothing can detract him from his purpose.

All three temptations are our temptations to lose sight of our call, purpose and grounding of love in God. Our temptation to turn stones into bread may be our own self-sufficiency and ability to make money as well as bread. We may have a gift for making money but in humility we remember our trust in God and call to multiply loaves for others in sharing that gift of money. We may not be tempted to leap off pinnacles but we should be willing to take other leaps of faith if we are in a spiritual place of strength and discernment of what to do with our one blessed life. We will always be tempted by the kingdoms and ways of the world, every set thing this world has to offer. It takes great courage and reliance on God to name the things that have a grip on us - our methods of escape in media, shopping, eating, drinking, whatever.

Lent is for giving up our money, giving up our addictions and giving up ourselves in prayer. By a conscientious, disciplined giving up of these things we find freedom to see that we don't actually need them after all. We are led to see God as the source of our comfort, strength and joy rather than our possessions and pleasures. Fasting in small things strengthens us to resist larger temptations.

Henri Nouwen's spiritual classic *With Open Hands* says, "When you dare to let go and surrender, your hand relaxes and your palms spread out in a gesture of receiving. You must have patience, of course, before your hands are completely open and their muscles relaxed. You can never fully achieve such an attitude, for behind each fist, another one is hiding, and sometimes the process seems endless. Much has happened in your life to make all these fists." God waits for us with open palms and will hold our hands, if we open our fists.

Jesus never requested fasting from us. He never said in the Sermon on the Mount, “if you fast,” but “when you fast.” He assumed that anyone who took his message seriously would already be fasting. On the other hand, Jesus was not noted for his fasting and abstinence, as were John the Baptist and his followers. Jesus knew how to have a good time and doesn’t condemn us for ours.

Those who choose to fast from something like chocolate or coffee find that a period of fasting can be a great aid. When we fast voluntarily, we remember those around the world who fast by necessity. Fasting voluntarily clears the mind and heart, and gives and new understanding. Fasting must be tempered by one’s circumstances though and is dangerous for those who are depressed or have eating disorders. Before we fast, we need to discuss our plan with a spiritual friend or companion. We are fasting toward joy, Easter, life, hope. We simplify, We cut things loose. We use silence. But we do all this as we move in faith toward hope. We move toward God.

Fasting can be holy therapy. Lent is an embodied way that we receive God’s healing and return to the One who is good and true. We don’t fast to prove our spiritual fervor. We do it because we’re physical people who, every so often, need to use our bodies to pay attention to God, to be renewed in God. Our hunger pangs remind us of our truest hunger, prodding us toward what our soul craves most.

A second century Christian mystic wrote, “the devil cannot lord it over those who serve God with their whole heart and who put their hope in God. The devil can wrestle with them, but cannot over come them.” Let’s pray...