

Will we trust and obey?

Preached on First Sunday of Lent
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
February 21, 2021
Text: Matt. 4: 1-11

As you know, today is the First Sunday in Lent, our 40 day period of prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and repentance prior to Easter. In some parishes, the Great Litany is chanted today as well as on Ash Wednesday, in lieu of a processional hymn. The Litany, or “General Supplication,” is a masterpiece of intercessory prayer, as it covers every possible need in responsive prayer. It was the first prayer to be adapted into English from the Latin during the Reformation, making it the oldest part of our Prayer Book.

Toward the top of Page 55 in our 1928 Book of Common Prayer, these words of the Litany appear:

By the mystery of thy holy Incarnation; by thy holy Nativity and Circumcision; by thy Baptism, Fasting, and Temptation, Good Lord, deliver us.

Have you ever paused to consider how it is that our Lord’s Fasting and Temptation can deliver us? Today’s Gospel reading from Matthew 4 invites us to reflect on Jesus’ time in the wilderness as well as our deliverance from sin.

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.

There are a few things we should notice here. First, the “then” should make us wonder what came first. If you look at the immediately preceding verses, you find that Jesus’s fasting and temptation took place right after his baptism. Jesus had just begun his ministry, and he was then led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. This is the second thing we ought to notice: it was the Holy Spirit who led Jesus into the desert, specifically so that he would be tempted by the devil. This was no chance encounter but a planned engagement on our Lord’s part. He went into the desert looking for a fight as soon as he began his public ministry. Third, we see the actual temptation occurs after 40 days of fasting, when he was all alone and hungry.

This is not the first time we see a 40-day fast in the Scriptures. Back in Exodus 34, Moses fasted for 40 days while he was on Mount Sinai receiving the second set of the Tablets of the Law after God relented from killing Israel over the Golden Calf incident. Moses spent those 40 days communing with God and interceding for his people. We also see the prophet Elijah fasting for 40 days when he is heading to Sinai to meet God after the Lord had rescued him from the wicked queen Jezebel (1 Kings 19). This pattern of 40 shows up often in Scripture. Noah spent 40 days riding out the rains of the Great Flood in Genesis, during which all of creation seemed to be forsaken, undergoing God’s judgement. Yet, it was through the waters of the flood that God would rescue humanity even as he was indeed passing judgement on our wickedness.

Like Moses, Jesus was fasting on behalf of his people. Like Elijah, Jesus would be the lone righteous man in the midst of wickedness. Like Israel, Jesus would be tempted in the wilderness. But unlike Israel, Jesus would resist it. Like Noah, Jesus would be the first fruits of new humanity who had been rescued from God's judgement, even as he would go through God's judgement.

Taken together, the three rejected temptations not only demonstrate that Jesus is righteous according to the law; they also prove his identity as God's divine and beloved son. Indeed, Satan's temptations get immediately to the core question of Jesus' identity, calling into question his relationship with God by beginning with the provocative, "*If you are the Son of God...*" This relationship with God, announced just verses after at his baptism, is now confirmed through Jesus' unswerving trust in his Father.

Individually, each temptation invites Jesus to turn away from trust in God in a different way. In the first, the devil invites Jesus to prove his sonship through a display of power; that is, by establishing his validity and worth through his own abilities. "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But Jesus has not come to demonstrate his ability to satiate our bodily needs and so win fame and worldly approval. He has not come to impress or make a name for himself, but to do the Father's will. Indeed, Jesus is very hungry and there is nothing wrong with needing to eat. But Satan isn't concerned about Jesus's hunger. Rather, he is trying to divert Jesus from his true mission and make the Kingdom of God all about his celebrity and our earthly comfort. Jesus was rejecting the so-called Prosperity Gospel here along with those modern preachers hawking a "name it and claim it" theology. The Father did not send Jesus satisfy our transient, worldly desires, but to open the way for our eternal satisfaction in God.

In the second temptation, Satan tries to induce Jesus to test God's fidelity. He takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple and says, "if you are the Son of God, throw yourself down." This is the temptation to measure the divine power, to control and manipulate the divine spirit, according to one's own terms. We want to have God under our control in order to get the things we want. But God's Kingdom is not about using God for human purposes. God's Kingdom is not something we use at all; it is something to which we must conform if we want to be part of it. "Thou shall not test the Lord thy God."

In the third temptation—really more an out-and-out bribe—Jesus is promised all the power and glory the earth can offer if he will give his allegiance and devotion to the Tempter. This temptation is very attractive to individuals and the Church. It promises us that we can be in control; we can be as God; we can finally have everything *our way*. We don't have to be hemmed in by the needs of others or the commands of God.

In each of these cases, Jesus encounters the temptation not to trust God, but to trust himself as the final authority. This echoes the temptation and fall of Adam and Eve. They are similarly invited to mistrust God. The serpent calls into question God's trustworthiness by suggesting that there is more to the story than God lets on. In this way the serpent sows the seeds of mistrust, inviting Adam and Eve to fulfill the deep want and need that is at the core of being human, not through their relationship with God, but by

seizing the fruit that is in front of them. It is the temptation to be self-sufficient, to establish their identity on their own.

Identity is again the focus of the Tempter in the scene of Jesus' temptation. "If you are the Son of God," Satan begins. In other words, "How do you know you are God's Son?" Hence the core of the temptation: "Wouldn't it be better to know for certain? Turn stone to bread, jump from the Temple, worship me...and you will never know doubt again. You will be sufficient on your own." The temptation is the same, but Jesus responds by refusing to establish his own worth and identity on his own terms, but instead remains dependent on God. Jesus knows *who* he is, that is, by remembering *whose* he is.

It is part of being human to be aware that we are insufficient and that we are not complete in and of ourselves. To be human, in other words, is to be aware that we carry inside ourselves an emptiness that we will always be restless to fill. Adam and Eve behold the fruit and conclude in a heartbeat that their needs can be met by that fruit. Yet after they eat, the emptiness remains. Today we might imagine that our emptiness can be cured by a new car, or wealth, or fame, or physical attractiveness.

But after laboring and sacrificing and obtaining these things, the emptiness remains. Blaise Pascal once described this essential condition of humanity as having a "God-shaped hole," and this is what Jesus demonstrates. There is no *true* filling of that void, except in and through our relationship with God. So, to be Christian is not to have that finitude erased once and for all. Rather, it is to accept that we are not self-sufficient. We have been created for relationship with God and will never be truly satisfied otherwise.

Christianity's denial of our self-sufficiency has always been a challenge to human pride, as well as popular conceptions of manhood. Many Christian men today are afraid that following Jesus's humility and suffering emasculates them. Hence, a large cottage industry has grown up, especially among Evangelicals, attempting to cast Jesus as "a man's man"; a Type-A personality who pushes himself and others; someone who exhibits "manly" virtues like toughness and self-reliance. He doesn't coddle others, and has little time for those pushing virtues thought too *feminine*, like trust and compassion. But the lesson of this Gospel is not that Jesus's worth is shown in how tough he is, though Jesus was quite strong and determined. Rather, we are to take from this passage that Jesus Christ has faced the temptations we face and thereby knows our struggles first hand. But he doesn't overcome them with the ease of an invulnerable super hero, but by taking the costly path of obedience and humility. He stood firm not so much in his own strength, but through the power of the Holy Spirit and his abiding trust in the Father.

Because Jesus now lives in us, we can draw on that same trust and obedience as we walk with him in faith. This same Jesus now invites us to claim that power from the God who named not only him—but all of us—beloved children. The crucial lesson of this Gospel, then, is not about what we can do if we have enough grit. Rather, it teaches us to hold on to our true identity as God's children by trusting in and submitting to our Heavenly Father in all things.

The Devil tempted our first parents with empty promises of godhood and they bought the lie. Jesus actually shared in the Godhead, but “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.” In humbling himself, in resisting the World, the Flesh, and the Devil, he became the Second Adam, who would be seated at the right hand of the Father, for ever and ever. Through his obedience, we have become his adopted brethren and co-heirs with him for eternity! Our first parents took the offered shortcut, and it led to disaster for the human race. Our Lord Jesus, on the other hand, took the long road, the road prepared for him by the Father, and saved us. May we keep this fact continually before our mind as we seek to observe a Holy Lent.

In the Name...