

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

“Times of Temptation and Testing”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Every year on the first Sunday of Lent, the gospel text is always the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. The reason for this is not hard to understand. At the beginning of Lent, we remind ourselves that, though Jesus is the Son of God, even Jesus experienced temptation and testing as a human being. For the Incarnation to make any sense at all, we must see Jesus tested as a human being so that we might understand that, we too, through the power of the Holy Spirit, might also resist times of temptation and testing.

The Lenten discipline of forty days imitates Christ’s forty days in the wilderness, during which we look to God for guidance and strength to resist times of temptation and testing in our lives. With God at the center, we will always be able to endure times of temptation and testing.

In each of the Synoptic Gospels the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism and he was immediately led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. It is significant that the gift of the Holy Spirit is given at baptism because it is the power to resist sin and evil. Jesus was tempted in his humanity, as are we, and the Holy Spirit will strengthen us if we but ask.

Lent is, therefore, a time to renew our reliance upon the grace and strength of the Holy Spirit given in baptism. In baptism, we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever. Lent is a time to return to God, understanding once again that we have access to the power of the Holy Spirit who will help us throughout our lives.

In the first temptation, Jesus ate nothing relying solely upon prayer and the power of the Spirit. Now I don’t recommend stopping eating during Lent, but fasting – or eating less – can help us. Who hasn’t experienced taking an energy level hit in the afternoon after a big lunch? Simply eating less may keep one’s mind and body a bit more focused during the day to tend to life’s tasks, while keeping us a bit more alert to our need for prayer and God’s help throughout the day.

Jesus’ reply to the first temptation, “*One does not live by bread alone,*” is a quotation from Deuteronomy (8:2-3), in which God reminded Israel that for forty years, God had humbled and tested Israel, “*to know what was in your heart.*” Jesus’ reply reminds us that resisting and overcoming times of temptation and testing begins in the human heart. Jesus’ reply also suggests a question for us: “If we do not live by bread alone, what feeds our heart and nourishes our spirit?” Lent is a time to

re-center our lives in the nourishment of God's grace. Every Sunday we come to this sanctuary seeking strength and direction from life's trials and temptations. Every Sunday we come before God with hands outstretched to receive the real presence of Jesus Christ, the bread of life.

In the second temptation the devil led Jesus, in an instant, to a vantage point upon all the world's kingdoms saying, "*If you worship me, it will all be yours.*" Again, in reply to the devil, Jesus quoted Deuteronomy (6:13), saying, "*Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.*" Jesus' reply to the second temptation remembers the God who brought Israel out of Egypt into a new land. Israel came to possess their land not by force or by conquest but through God's promise. To "*worship and serve God alone*" are words remembering God as the source of all we have and all that our neighbor has. As Martin Luther wrote in the *Small Catechism*, regarding the Ninth Commandment, we are not to covet what belongs to our neighbor; rather, we are to love and serve God so that we are of help and service to our neighbor in helping them keep what is theirs.

In the third temptation, Jesus was tempted to an empty self-display of divine power. Jesus was tempted to boast in or display his divine power before the world. The third temptation, however, makes little sense because Jesus is the Word of God through whom the world was created. Christ Jesus was born to reveal God's power made perfect in suffering and weakness for all people through the cross, not in self-serving displays of power. Only the suffering God can help a suffering world. Likewise, only by suffering in love for one's neighbor do we reveal the power of God hidden in the cross and resurrection.

All three of these temptations share one common theme: the temptation to replace God with human power: the power of appetite, the power of ambition to rule, and the power of the ego to empty self-display. Times of temptation and testing are powerful because they attempt to twist and warp the human spirit and God's power. Like Jesus, we are tempted to forget God and to act alone.

Imagine if Jesus worried more about feeding himself, rather than feeding the hungry and the crowds; imagine if Jesus was more concerned about extending his own earthly power and authority, rather than extending God's kingdom in service to all people; imagine if Jesus showed his divine greatness, rather than emptying himself in holy and loving service as a servant of all people.

In the temptation of Jesus we begin to see that, only in emptying ourselves, can God dwell in our hearts. During Lent we give, pray and fast, in order to empty ourselves of those things – appetites, ambition and pride – that get in the way of God's word dwelling in our hearts. I think this is why Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "*lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*" The *Lord's*

*Prayer* frames the context of our daily lives, because daily we are beset with temptation and an encounter with evil. Daily we are tempted to satisfy our appetites, ambitions, and pride. The temptations that Jesus underwent are no different than the kinds of temptation and testing that humanity faces every day.

Lent is a time to honestly ask ourselves: “What obstacles do I put before God in my life? Are there things in my life that I treat as more important than God’s word in my life? Do the material things of the world, ambition for power, or vain human pride fill my heart? Can I empty my heart of these temptations so that I might serve God and my neighbor?”

Every day we see people seeking to fulfill their appetites for ambition and pride by lording themselves over others rather than serving their neighbor. Every day we see ideologies and political agendas rule the human heart. As the devil tempted Jesus to selfishly misuse power, we are also tempted to misuse the power God has given to us solely for our own gain rather than for our neighbor.

We are also living in a time of temptation and testing – a time in which we see worldly power misused for the satisfaction of an appetite for political ambition, personal pride, and national glory. Temptation and testing in the wilderness is not simply an ancient biblical tale. Temptation and testing in the wilderness is a very real and present human reality. These forty days of Lent are also a moment in world history in which we see the battle for the human heart. Whom will we serve?

Today in the Ukraine, instead of treating neighbors as sisters and brothers, one nation is oppressing another, forgetting the commandment to help and serve one’s neighbor to keep what is theirs. The sin of anti-Semitism by Christians continues to forget that Jesus was a Jew. As Paul writes in Romans,

*For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”*

In the wilderness, Jesus helps us see that with God’s help we can also respond to evil in the wilderness of our world today. If we are strong, we should help the weak. If we have material wealth, power or the ambition to act, we should use these gifts to help the weak, vulnerable and oppressed in the wilderness of this world. Jesus came not to be served or to serve himself, but to serve others. Jesus extends his kingdom not by force or conquest, but by love and mercy.

This Lent, amidst great temptation and great suffering, choose to serve alongside Jesus, helping him and relying upon the power of the Holy Spirit.

To love God means caring for and protecting one’s neighbor. In times of testing and temptation, resist evil, serve and love God, always doing good for one’s neighbor. Amen.