

2.26.2023 Lent 1

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Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

“The free gift of grace”

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

Good morning. On the First Sunday in Lent, the gospel reading is always the testing or temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. The reason we read this text at the beginning of Lent is because Jesus helps us see his grace in our humanity as we face testing and temptation in this world.

Why do Matthew, Mark and Luke even mention Jesus being tempted? Jesus is divine, right? Jesus could withstand anything, right? Aren't we just ordinary mortals, prone to life's testing and temptation that Jesus would never understand? These kinds of questions about Jesus are understandable, but Jesus was just as human as you and me. He could be tempted, he ate and slept, he became angry, experienced grief, and wept as a human being. In the incarnation, the Word of God emptied himself, becoming fully human so that we might see the fullness of our humanity. If you take a look at the high altar, you will see the cross that we turn each Lent, revealing Christ crucified. In Jesus, we see the God hidden in the suffering of our humanity.

The Letter to the Hebrews puts it this way: “*Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested*” (Hebrews 2:18). Jesus knows our every weakness and his temptation helps us as we face times of temptation and testing over and over in our lives. Hebrews again encourages us with these words: “*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin*” (Hebrews 4:15).

Jesus contended with challenges and tests that all human beings experience: the test of physical hunger and the desire of material things, the test of our felt need for protection and the avoidance of suffering, and the test of our human desire for power and control. Each of the synoptic Gospels record Jesus' temptation in the wilderness as occurring immediately after his baptism just before the start of his ministry. In other words, Jesus was empowered with the gift of the Holy Spirit in baptism, and sent into the wilderness to undergo testing that prepared him for ministry.

Lent is a time to reflect upon the testing and temptation that we each face and must overcome. We, too, are faced with the temptation to satisfy our physical hunger and desires; we

are tempted to seek our own protection rather than protecting others, and we are tempted with a desire for power and authority over others and our human institutions.

The journey of Lent is about struggling with our own hunger and greed by fasting and living with less; it is about seeking God's grace and help in prayer, not only for ourselves but also for our neighbor and our enemies; it is about giving to others and giving up our constant seeking of power over others. The discipline of Lent is about what goes on in our hearts.

Immediately after his baptism, Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit to be tested in the wilderness by the devil. It's crucial that we pay attention to the word translated as "tempted," because it means to be "tested in one's faith." Temptation is a testing of our character as Christians. Like Jesus, each of us have been called beloved children and given the gift of the Holy Spirit in baptism. Like Jesus, the free gift of the Spirit helps us contend with the testing of evil and temptation. Do we rely upon this spiritual gift each day?

The Greek word for "temptation" really means to face a test that will reveal your true character, your true self. Paul said it this way, *"No testing (or temptation) has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it"* (1 Cor. 10:13). This is why Jesus' temptation in the wilderness can help us. Jesus didn't overcome temptation simply because he was God's beloved Son; he overcame this time of testing because he relied upon the word of God and the power of the Holy Spirit alive in him.

What is so fascinating to me about this experience of Jesus is that it made its way into the gospel stories. Though Jesus was alone in the wilderness, he must have shared this experience with his disciples. Jesus must have shared his innermost wilderness struggles with his disciples so that they would also know the power of God in their lives.

The point of today's gospel is that Jesus was tempted as we are in life's wilderness, and he met this test with the grace of the Holy Spirit and God's word. He overcame hunger so that he could feed the hungry; he overcame worry about his own suffering so that he could care for the sick and bear the suffering of those in need; he overcame the desire for earthly power, so that he could overcome and transform earthly power with his kingdom of love. The wilderness prepared Jesus to begin ministry. Our response to testing and temptation is an opportunity to be in ministry with and for others.

Just as testing defined Jesus and his ministry, testing also defines who we are as Christians and as a church in this community. Like Jesus, our response to testing opens ministry to us to feed the hungry, care for the suffering, and overcome the kingdoms of this world that seek to oppress others with their power.

We become people who respond to the test of wealth by using what we have been given for the good of our neighbor in need. We become people who having been healed by Jesus, respond to the suffering of our neighbor in need. We become people who see the misuse of human power and its injustice in the kingdoms and institutions of this world, and who work to transform this world with God's kingdom of grace and love.

How will you use these forty days of Lent? Pay attention to your heart and God's free gift of grace. Seek out times of solitude and prayer; nourish and feed your faith during Lent. Be sustained by the body and blood of Christ who will recreate you to live in this wilderness for others. He has overcome the world and its temptations so that we might also overcome our own testing by the evil and injustice of this world.

The free gift of grace has been given to you so that you might resist sin and evil. Jesus said to Satan, "*Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.*" Serve God who comes to you as the neighbor in your midst. Overcome temptation with grace not only for yourself, but for your neighbor in need. When you have times of testing, ask yourself what Jesus would do.

Give, pray, and fast. Overcome evil with good. Jesus knows your every weakness. Rely upon him. Amen.