

First Sunday in Lent
Year A RCL
March 1, 2020
North Fork Ministries

Gospel:

Matthew 4:1-11

Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written,

'One does not live by bread alone,

but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you,'

and 'On their hands they will bear you up,

so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

'Worship the Lord your God,

and serve only him.'"

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

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When I was about 8 years old I considered it altogether possible that a cape-like terry cloth towel, knotted around my neck and flowing down my back superman fashion, just might enable me to leap off the roof of our barn and soar across the hayfield into the valley below. Thankfully, it was a temptation I resisted. I suspect that the angels, rather than bearing me up, would have allowed me to learn a more practical lesson about the power of gravity – and achieve the early realization that I was no superhero.

But still, we all yearn to live into our potential – to discover who we are and what we are meant to be. And we all look for a way to make that discovery of self – a reality. Jesus, in this episode with the devil is in the process of discovering just who he is. He is hungry and the devil offers him a way to turn stones to bread. Climbing with Jesus to the top of the temple in Jerusalem, the devil offers him a way to verify his greatness – "Throw yourself off and watch the angels scoop you up," Satan suggests. And then the devil offers Jesus the splendor of the world, but Jesus turns down the proposition.

We're reading this lesson in the First Sunday in Lent because it provides the first hint of what is to come at the end of the 40 days. The story sets the stage for a

theology of the cross. The theology of the cross isn't a theology of splendor and power, but a theology of weakness and suffering. Time and again Jesus turned his back on power, stature, and wealth and embraced a destiny of powerlessness and poverty. Jesus refusal to accept the temptation to accept what the world views as important – points the way to the cross.

However, we might ask, "What would be wrong with taking one of the options that the devil offered?" Turning stones to bread...in a world where a quarter of its people go to bed hungry, how could we say no to that power? Leaping off the roof of a tall building and having the angels lift you up? What better way to attract the crowd's attention and draw people into the kingdom Christ wished to create? I can imagine that being a very useful tool for evangelism. And possession of the world and its splendor? In a world of poverty and injustice, think of what an outreach program we could put together with an endowment like that.

But Jesus refused to use God to claim something for himself. As Paul put it in his letter to the Philippians, Jesus "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant." The way of the cross wasn't something that just happened while Jesus went about the business of accumulating power, fame, and wealth. Jesus deliberately chose a servant's path. How could Jesus have accepted the devil's promise of the best the world had to offer and then tell his followers that salvation comes through God alone?

And we are fooling ourselves if we think that Christianity can be treated as just another hobby – providing us with something to do on Sunday mornings, while what really gets our juices flowing is a quest for money and what it buys – what the world and the devil tells us are important. If we as Christians spend all our time and all our resources in lockstep with the demands of a consumer-driven economy, what separates us from the world? We are fooling ourselves if we think that some vague sense of holiness or "spirituality" can overcome a singular devotion to the pursuit of the all mighty dollar. Without a spiritual practice to remind us of who we are and who we aspire to be, without a discipline that continually reminds us that we are children of God first, we are quickly consumed by the dictates of a world that still scoffs at the "servanthood" of Christians.

Jesus was still dripping wet from his baptism by John when he went into the wilderness for his 40 days of fasting. Those 40 days were a spiritual retreat that set the gold standard by which all others are measured. If you've never taken a spiritual retreat, I urge you to try spending a few days in silence with God. It will change you. However, you will return to a world that, while it may look a little different, will essentially be the one you left behind. And like Jesus, you will find that the temptation to immediately immerse yourself in the pursuits that the world finds important will surround you and tempt you.

Jesus, who was able to embrace his humanity and his divinity in a perfect way, could resist the devil's offer of wealth, fame, and power. But even Jesus received a little

help. The gospel reading ends in words of comfort, "Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him."

We have angels to assist us as well. And those angels are named discipline, practice, and devotion. Prayer, fasting, meditation, the practice of mindfulness – it's what keeps us centered, aware of the presence of God, and arms us against everything in the world that pulls us away from Christ-consciousness. It helps to come to church regularly. We have, in our corporate worship, a concentrated time to bring our focus to the Divine. But an hour or so, once a week, just really isn't enough. Each day the average American is exposed to more than 5000 ads. 5000 thousand tempting voices saying, listen to this, look at this, buy this, be this way. It is impossible to overcome the persuasive power of those voices just by the force of human will alone.

So I urge you, during Lent, to begin a practice meant to last a lifetime. Begin your day with Morning Prayer, watch every sunset, practice yoga or Tai Chi, sweep your floors with mindfulness, turn a walk through the neighborhood or along the beach into a meditation, read the scripture, recognize a craving for junk food as the call of a deeper hunger. In all you do, move toward an awareness that every conscious breath you take brings with it new life and new hope.