

## **An Opportune Time**

### **Luke 4:1-13**

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.

The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”

Jesus answered him,

“It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.

And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please.

You, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.”

Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.’”

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

Jesus answered him,

“It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

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Luke 4:1-13

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### **I.**

Today, I admit I stand before you feeling more than a little conflicted; and I'm wondering if you might feel the same? Strictly speaking, and just *how* strict we'll need to get to in a few minutes, historians generally agree that the 40-day period before Easter known as Lent (from Anglo-Saxon word *lencten* meaning "springtime" and related to the German word *lenz* meaning "spring") emerged after the Council of Nicea in 325 CE. Earliest observances of Lent seem to have focused particularly on the practice of fasting. At first, the fast applied mainly to new converts as a period of repentance and reflection before baptism at Easter, but eventually became a church-wide practice. The 40 days count back from Easter to "Ash Wednesday," excluding Sundays, echoing the 40 days of fasting Jesus undertook in the wilderness into which he was led by Spirit, and during which he was tempted by the devil; as found in today's sermon text.

### **II.**

Though it varied from region to region and has changed over time, in every case the fast was strict: one meal a day after 3 p.m. with no meat, fish, or dairy allowed. The practice of "fasting" is in no way the sole purview of Christianity, however, as many religions and cultures feature some form of fasting; most notably the 25 hour fast observed at Yom Kippur in Judaism and the 30 day fast of Ramadan, obligatory for all Muslims, with no eating, drinking, or engaging in sensual activity between the break of dawn and sunset.

Whereas fasting can be powerful spiritual tool and a purposeful sign of the depth and resoluteness of one's faith, early Protestants, particularly our theological and ecclesiastical forebears, the Calvinists, took issue with the practice of fasting, in specific, and Lent, in general, claiming there was no scriptural basis for it. They condemned Lent as "man's tradition and a works-based vanity." John Calvin considered Lent, "merely false zeal, replete with superstition, which set up a fast under the title and pretext of imitating Christ."

### III.

While fasting surely occupies a place of significance in today's scripture reading from Luke 4:1-13, we should take note that any notion of penitence (the action of feeling or showing sorrow and regret for having done wrong) is clearly absent. As heirs to the Reformed doctrine *Sola Scriptura* ("By Scripture Alone") it behooves us to draw a distinction between the focus derived from fasting, evidenced in the biblical text, and the "I'm not worthy" penitential nature of Lent which was inculcated by the early church.

Ironically, what has survived the centuries is not the role and value of fasting as a spiritual discipline, but the emphasis on emotional and psychological flagellation as a prerequisite to faith. Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is not a model of self-denial to be emulated but, rather, a paradigm of appropriate priority setting which serves as both rule and guide to our faith and our lives.

### IV.

Examining the story, we find three spiritual guardrails: that one does not live by bread alone, to worship and serve only God, and to not put God to the test. Rather than individually examining each of these three admonishments, I would also like to suggest we consider them *in their totality* as the means to a right relationship *with* and orientation *to* God.

First, though, let us enlarge the frame. In the first chapter of Luke's Gospel the birth of John the Baptist is foretold. The second chapter recounts the birth of Jesus. Chapter three finds John the Baptist preparing the way for the Messiah's arrival, then, Jesus is himself baptized with heaven opening and the Holy Spirit descending on him in bodily form like a dove; a voice from heaven is heard, saying: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Immediately, at the start of chapter four, Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returns from the Jordan and is led by the Spirit in the wilderness.

### V.

Though the story of Jesus going toe-to-toe with the devil is often seen as a nod to his *divinity*, what is actually being stressed throughout each of these first four chapters is Jesus' *humanity*; with the nature of the relationship between the two becoming the fundamental question which would fully define

his first followers and greatly occupy the early church. Whereas the liturgical season of Lent, in its earliest forms and as we know it today, is most commonly understood as setting an unattainable goal adherents to the faith are to strive for nevertheless, the real lesson Lent has to teach us is the veracity of Jesus' humanity. Lent is not about striving to emulate Jesus' suffering, it is a reminder that Jesus was just like us. While the story would, no doubt, be much more impressive if Jesus demonstrated his *divinity*, Jesus goes to extreme lengths to, instead, demonstrate his *humanity*; and the need to keep right the relationship between our humanity and our Creator.

## VI.

Rather than turning stone into bread, Jesus acknowledges that as the crown of creation, we need not allow ourselves to be ruled by bestial needs or wanton desires. The attainment of "bread" alone, either literal or symbolic, is not our chief end, nor is it the pursuit of greatest urgency. On the contrary, Jesus' response to the devil underscores a quiet contentment to live within the limits of life, regardless of one's particular ratio of bread to stone, and a positive affirmation of the bounds inherent in our creatureliness. Any self-denial at work in Jesus, is a denial of the all too common human tendency to confuse "want" with "need."

## VII.

In response to the Faustian bargain offered to Jesus, to give false worship in exchange for all the kingdoms of the world, Jesus affirms the truth of our existence: we owe all we have, and all we are, to the One who called us into existence from across both time and space, imbuing us with an intrinsic purpose and an innate value by simple virtue of having been birthed of God. As such, we are to worship and serve *only* God, as it is our relationship as creature to Creator which first, and finally, not only defines us, but is more than sufficient to delight us. Above all else, the act of worship is a sign of one's gratitude, and an acknowledgement of one's bounty; even, and especially, in the midst of whatever we may perceive as the weight of our loss or lack. Such "right" worship reveals the wisdom which arises from a proper understanding of who we are, from whence we have come, and to which we shall most assuredly go.

## VIII.

Having stood firm and confident within the limits of his humanity, and having upheld the rightness of relationship with God, Jesus' final temptation is that of zeal and self-importance. As one might teeter on the pinnacle of the temple, each day's journey through this world is always a precarious balancing act. Those who realize as much tend to walk softly regardless of how large a stick we may carry by virtue of our status as the children of God; even Jesus, with a heavenly voice still singing sweetly in his ear, "you are my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." When we put God to the test, we forget the directionality of our relationship with God: God does not exist for our benefit, but we for God's. The true mark of understanding that one is a daughter or son of God, is to walk with humility and gentleness upon this earth.

## IX.

Finally, seeing that Jesus would not succumb to the temptations set before him, we are told that the devil departed from him until "an opportune time"; which is a very curious statement. Frankly, one can hardly imagine a context which is *more* opportune than this one: alone, vulnerable and weakened in body. Certainly the devil's sentiment may be a harbinger of the trial to come in the Garden of Gethsemane when, later in Luke's Gospel, we read, "And being in anguish, Jesus prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground," or foreshadows the moment from Matthew 27 when, dying on the cross, Jesus utters, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" While this may be a convenient explanation, and certainly within the realm of possibility, perhaps a more likely explanation for such in-opportuneness was the focus derived from fasting, and the clarity which came from solitude.

## X.

Then again, perhaps the devil was not at all referring to some future opportune time to tempt and test the *spirit* of Jesus but, rather, an opportune time to tempt and test the *body* of Christ? Like during a time of global pandemic, or when politics so easily and bitterly divide a hereto before indivisible nation, or when the entire world is put on edge owing to an unslakable thirst for power, war-mongering and naked aggression, with nuclear sabers being rattled once more, or when an inexplicable and

seemingly random act of violence takes the life of a local college student, or when yet another area teenager takes their own life, or when simple decency, civil decorum and any sense of shame are scorned, or when we fail to simply turn from all we have allowed ourselves to continue to be distracted by and from what we all agree is rotting us from the inside out.

## **XI.**

We can hardly *image* a more opportune time than that which we have now created for ourselves. One into which we have so easily led each other, and one in which it is all too easy to yield to the temptations of living by bread alone, worshipping *anything* other than our Creator, and relentlessly putting God to the test at each and every turn we can conceive.

While we might be sorely tempted to simply look to the empty tomb on Easter morning as the means of escaping our current wilderness, we will only fully arrive there by first traveling through the journey which is the season of Lent. Today, as a first step and guidepost, we look to this morning's scripture reading of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. What we have found herein, is the realization that what stayed Jesus successfully through his own humanity was a fullness of Spirit which came from *beyond* him, and the clarity and focus which arose *within* him as a function of fasting and solitude.

## **XII.**

While a voice from heaven may not be parting the clouds for us anytime soon, even now, each and every Sunday, God speaks to us through scripture and the voice of this congregation to remind us that we, too, are beloved by our Creator and that in spite of the wilderness in which we now find ourselves, we may yet be well-pleasing to the One who birthed us. This sanctuary, this family of faith, is our River Jordan; the place beyond us where the Spirit is poured out upon us to sustain and led us through our own trails and temptations. Now, in this Season of Lent, we are called to proclaim a fast within ourselves so we might strip away the superfluous, and focus on the foundation of our faith in order that we might have the strength to carry the stone rather than bow to the bread.

### **XIII.**

Now, in this Season of Lent, we are called to step away from the world and seek a solitude with God in order to discover the clarity of our own humanity and realize, with gratefulness, our utter reliance on the One who created us.

Now, in this Season of Lent, we are called to end the conflict within ourselves, and between our neighbors, so as to stop putting God to the test with the hell-bound world we seem hell-bent to create. Instead, at such an opportune time, let us test *ourselves*, and the mettle of our *own* faith, as we journey together through these next 40 days on our way to Easter morning. Amen.