

Scriptures: Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16, Luke 4:1-13

Lent Begins on Ash Wednesday

Wednesday was Ash Wednesday, and we had a worship service at New Hope at 6:30, to kick off the Lenten season in the Church calendar. It's a period of time before Easter, when we focus and reflect on our need for a Savior. The word "Lent" actually comes from an Old English word that means "springtime." But Lent isn't a celebration of the renewing of nature caused by the Earth shifting on its axis to put the Northern Hemisphere closer to the sun, rather it's a celebration of the renewing of human lives caused by God's grace.

We have to be careful about using the word celebration when we think about Lent – it's not a joyful, joy-filled party. It's a season of reflection and repentance that leads to spiritual renewal, by refocusing on the work Jesus Christ did for us on the cross. Lent has been called a time of transformation – because it allows us to think about the ways in which we might need to most change ourselves, to be better disciples of Jesus Christ, for the transformation of the world. So, on Wednesday evening, we kicked the season off, with a traditional service and imposition of ashes. I personally struggle with the Ash Wednesday service each year. If I'm being honest, I like it the least of all the services we do here, because it jars me out of my "comfort zone."

It sets me up with three things which I do not like to deal with: loss, sadness, and the inevitability of death. When those three things intersect, as they do on Ash Wednesday, I have a hard time holding it all together. This is most difficult for me while I impose the ashes – seeing the faces of so many people who I love, looking them in the eye, and telling them, "from dust you came, and to dust you shall return." Maybe you feel that way, too. I suspect it may be the reason that only 24 or 25 of you came Wednesday night. As emotionally painful, and draining as it is, it sets us up for a successful journey through Lent to Easter morning. It lets us experience the depths of human despair and remorse, and also the overflowing abundance of God's goodness and grace. And Jesus experienced the full range of all these feelings which we have, too. We're going to look at an example of that today in Luke's gospel. If you brought your Bible, or have a Bible app handy, turn with me to Luke 4:1-13. I'll be reading from the New International Version today. **Read Luke 4:1-13.**

Tempted with Food

Our gospel lesson from Luke comes immediately after Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River by His cousin, John the Baptist. In between Jesus' baptism and what we know today as the Temptation of Jesus, Luke adds the genealogy of Jesus Christ – to show how He's related to other Bible characters. There are some well-known guys

listed in there, like King David, David's great-grandpa Boaz (from book of Ruth fame), Judah, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham, and even Noah who built the ark. Luke lists the guys in reverse order, and traces Jesus' ancestry clear back to Adam, who Luke lists as "the son of God," (Luke 3:38), lower cased "s" there.

Luke tells us, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days He was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them He was hungry," (Luke 4:1-2). Picture this in your mind. Jesus has been fasting for forty days out in the wilderness. He's alone. No one to talk to – except the Father – and nothing to eat. He's hungry. Church, if you hadn't eaten for forty days, would you be hungry? I know you would be! I would be, too.

So Satan comes at Him, when Jesus' hunger is at its greatest, and Jesus' resistance to the testing is presumably at its weakest. "The devil said to Him, 'If You are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread,'" (verse 3). How the devil approaches Jesus regarding His immediate need of food strikes me as almost comical, and maybe some of you think that, too, especially when Satan uses the phrase, "If You are the Son of God." It's almost like Satan is trying to plant doubts in Jesus' mind regarding who Jesus is on a first reading of it, but when you look deeper at it, Satan is really laying on the charm. The devil's tricky. He doesn't come at us in a red suit, pitchfork, and horns. He comes at us in ways which appear very innocent, beguiling – to use an old-timey kind of word – charmingly deceptive. He's not suggesting for Jesus to doubt Himself here, what he's actually saying is, "Hey Jesus, You're the Son of God. Tell this stone to become bread." He's twisting things around to try to get Jesus to feel like it would be okay to give into the temptation to use His power – as God-in-the-flesh – to give Himself instant gratification and meet the immediate, selfish need of food.

Some of the best things in life are worth waiting for, aren't they? Jesus responds to the devil by saying, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone,'" (verse 4). Jesus says, "it is written," because He knows it's contained in the Scriptures. What He responds to Satan with is actually a quote from Moses found in Deuteronomy 8:3, where Moses tells the ancient Israelites, "He [God] humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." Jesus understands that we want things, often with immediate effect, but He knows what's best for us and will help us wait for some of those best things, rather than having everything "right now."

Tempted with Immediate Power

The next thing we're told is that "The devil led Him up to a high place and showed Him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world," (Luke 4:5). We aren't sure how that occurred. I suppose it was a mountaintop someplace, from which many

countries on the globe could be seen. But even if you're physically on the International Space Station looking down on the earth, you can't see every nation in the world in that instant. It takes some time for it to orbit the planet. I'm not suggesting that the devil beamed Jesus up to some spaceship floating around up there, I'm just saying that we don't know how this was accomplished. The main point though, is what the devil says to Jesus, and specifically how Jesus responds.

“And Satan said to Jesus, ‘I will give You all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if You worship me, it will all be Yours,’” (verses 6-7). That had to have been probably the most tempting offer Satan threw at Jesus – to have God's kingdom on earth, immediately, without having to go to the cross. “Jesus answered, ‘It is written: Worship the Lord your God and serve Him only,’” (verse 8). This is another quote that Jesus uses from Scripture in response to the devil. Deuteronomy 6:13 says, “Fear the Lord your God, serve Him only and take your oaths in His name.” Aren't you glad Jesus loved us enough to resist the temptation of the “easy-way-out” the devil offered here, and went to the cross for us?

Tempted with Pride

Satan sees that his mountaintop experience with Jesus didn't work, so he hatches Plan B, or Plan C by this point, I guess. “The devil led Him to Jerusalem and had Him stand on the highest point of the temple. ‘If You are the Son of God,’ he said, ‘throw Yourself down from here. For it is written: He will command His angels concerning You to guard You carefully; they will lift You up in their hands, so that You will not strike Your foot against a stone,’” (Luke 4:9-11). I want to pause here and just say, the devil knows the Scriptures, too. That's why we have to have spiritual discernment. Are people who we're talking to really living lives that give glory to God revealed in Jesus Christ? That's a litmus test we should be using when we're interacting with people – and the standard we should be measuring ourselves against. Through my words and deeds, is Jesus Christ – crucified, resurrected, glorified – revealed to others?

The trouble in the Church today, in general, is there are lots of wolves in sheep's clothing. They talk a good talk, but don't walk the walk. So, the old devil quotes Scriptures to the Author of Life, specifically Psalm 91:11-12. The problem is, Satan's twisting it to make it sound like it's applicable and specific only to Jesus. When you look at Psalm 91:1-2, it says, “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, ‘He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.’” Going a little further, to verses 9-10, it says, “If you make the Most High your dwelling – even the Lord, who is my refuge – then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent.” These are promises given generally to all people who put their trust in God. The Psalmist is showing us that God is going to take care of us. That's what the verses refer to. Yet Satan doesn't accurately quote the verses he uses. Psalm 91:11-12 read, “For He will command His angels concerning

you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.” It doesn’t say “guard you carefully,” as Satan interprets. He tries to twist the word of God against God Himself, in order to test God’s faithfulness and attract a huge public reaction.

Let’s think about it. The temple is the main attraction in Jerusalem. Jesus is standing at the peak of it. If He jumps, everyone in Jerusalem is going to see it. And if the angels come rushing down out of Heaven to catch Him, every person who ever doubted Jesus being the Son of God is going to instantly realize they’re wrong. If they realize they’re wrong about Him, what happens? It’s a frightening thought, isn’t it? If the chief priests and Sanhedrin see that Jesus truly is God, then there would be no Good Friday. No cross. No empty tomb or resurrection. We would all be lost, and you and I would be on the highway to Hell!

Is the Lord with Us?

But praise God! Jesus, the Living Word, knows Scripture better than the devil! “Jesus answered, ‘It says: Do not put the Lord your God to the test,’” (Luke 4:12), which is a partial quote of Deuteronomy 6:16. That verse reads, “Do not test the Lord your God as you did at Massah.” It’s remarkable all the different connections within and between Scripture. I’m wrapping up a Course of Study class on the Bible and it amazes me to see the layering of meanings and the interweaving between the texts that extend far beyond anything the human writers of the books could have ever imagined. This verse Jesus quotes, from Deuteronomy alludes to an event recorded in Exodus while the ancient Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years. Hmm. Jesus is tempted for forty days in the desert. The Israelites wandered the desert for forty years. Another beautiful parallel. In Exodus 17 the Israelites are grumbling about being thirsty to Moses, so Moses strikes the rock, and water came out for the people to drink. Remember that story? “So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the Lord saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’” (Exodus 17:6b-7).

When we read about the temptation of Jesus, that’s the question we think Satan is trying to generate to Jesus with his constant use of “if you are the Son of God,” isn’t it? In other words, “Are You really the Son of God, Jesus?” That’s probably because we live in an age of skepticism and doubt. Earlier this week, Kendra was telling me about people over in Ukraine who had witnessed some amazing supernatural events over the last week. They’ve seen a pillar of fire destroy Russian tanks. Balls of lightning flash out of nowhere that completely demolish Russian units. I was skeptical. Then she sent me the link to the news article, which I read. Is the Lord among us or not? It’s a good question, even today, with a definite answer for those who have placed their trust in Jesus Christ, and have allowed Him to take up permanent residence in their hearts. He is with us!

An Opportune Time

Our passage today closes with the statement, “When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left Him until an opportune time,” (Luke 4:13). And friends, sometimes we experience that opportune time. We find out that things aren’t going our way, and the devil comes at us with schemes to have it how we want it, to take the easy way out, or to cause doubts about whether or not God really cares about us.

Sometimes we can get so caught up in just the tempting, that we can slip into a mindset where we see the temptation as being something that’s wrong or bad. Temptation isn’t bad. Temptation turns bad when we act on it, and do something sinful as a result. Jesus being tempted doesn’t make Him bad – it makes Him human – like you and me.

Luke records that Jesus never gave into the things He was tempted with, because He kept the words of Holy Scripture in His heart. Jesus understands when we face temptations, and He’s there for us even when we fall into sin! The writer of Hebrews tells us, “Jesus has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet He was without sin,” (Heb. 4:15). Jesus knows the rough time we have when we see something we want, when we’re going through something we don’t want to go through, or when we struggle with doubts. And He loves us. So during this Lenten season, refocus on Jesus Christ and what He’s done for us. Renew your relationship with Him through daily disciplines of prayer and reading His word. Because someday He’s going to gather us up to be with Him!

Let’s pray: God of deliverance and freedom, deepen our faith so that we may resist temptation and, in the midst of trial, proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord, now and forever. Amen.