

Sermon

Lent 1C March 9, 2025

Luke 4:1-13

Welcome to Lent, that penitential season of self-inflicted misery and austerity. That season of giving up chocolate and fun. Or so popular culture tells us. But as I've said, Lent isn't about 40 days of misery, austerity, and no fun. Lent is really about making lasting changes that benefit ourselves and our relationship with God.

We are called to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word. But in order to do this, we must be honest with ourselves. We must be honest in our self-examination so that we may see how we have harmed others or fallen short, and then be willing to repent and make amends. We must be willing to fast from things which harm ourselves and others. We must be willing to do away with those things that draw us from God and get better at doing those things which bring us closer.

As we work through our self-examinations, we can ask ourselves, "How are we tempted?" We get a good look at what temptation looks like in today's gospel.

After his baptism, Jesus is led into the wilderness where he's tempted by the devil for forty days. We are well-familiar with those temptations: turning rocks to bread, having authority over all kingdoms and nations, and trust God to save you from death. All of these temptations come while he is fasting. All of them come at a time when he is probably the most susceptible to hearing those temptations.

As a culture we tend to attribute giving into temptation to times of weakness. For instance, I fast every Ash Wednesday, and on the corner of my desk sits a bag of Lindor milk chocolate truffles. And about 4:00 in the afternoon, with that bag sitting there and proclaiming, "Irresistibly smooth," I was at a point of weakness.

But think about this: instead of temptation coming from a place of weakness (I didn't eat any truffles), it comes from a place of strength. We are not tempted to do that which we can't, we are tempted to do that which we can to a greater degree. When we are tempted, we are not tempted to fall, but to rise.

Eve wasn't tempted to become like the devil, she was tempted to become like God. An alcoholic isn't tempted to take another drink because he's fallen on hard times, he takes another drink because he's tempted to think he has beaten alcoholism. We see it again and again in politicians, police, clergy, doctors, lawyers, and others. People in a position of power or authority are tempted to abuse their power because they are led to think they are better than others. The greater the strength or position, the greater the temptation.

Temptation is a paradox. We aren't tempted in our weakness, but in our strengths. If we pursue our weaknesses, we often have resources to rely on. If we pursue our strengths, we rely on ourselves. As Paul says, "Whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

It takes a certain strength to admit weakness. It takes a certain strength to admit you have sinned, to repent, and to make restitution. And on the flip side of that, it is the weak person who will not admit to failures, sins, or regrets. It is the weak bully who grasps for power – but power doesn't always equate with strength.

As has been said, temptation is deceptively attractive. We are not tempted outright with debauchery or personal or social ruin. That comes later, after we have taken incrementally small bites of the apple. The temptations of Jesus were nothing beyond his power, but the temptations were to use his power inappropriately. He was tempted to use his power to take the easy way out.

In Lent we are called to self-examination and repentance; prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and to read and meditate on God's holy Word. These things are at the core of long-term changes designed to draw us closer to God.

I don't know what your Lenten discipline is, nor do I much care. What I care about is how will that discipline draw you closer to God and how will it change you to more reflect the love of Christ on the world?

As we journey through Lent we will be tempted to break whatever discipline we have chosen to follow. We will be tempted to break those disciplines not because we are weak, but because it will appeal to our sense of strength. We will be tempted to break our discipline because it will appeal to our belief that we are already good enough.

If you commit to, say, reading a chapter of 2 Kings every weekday during Lent starting tomorrow (because there are 25 chapters and 25 weekdays from Monday until Holy Week), it'll be easy to say, "I'm a fast reader, so I can easily make up a day." Or if you give up sweets, it'll be easy to say, "My diet's good, I can splurge every now and then." Or maybe you want to pray a Daily Office (Morning or Evening Prayer), you might say, "I go to church every Sunday, it's okay - I'm good."

Temptations arise because we think we are stronger than we are.

But know this: it's okay to admit weakness, because it is in acknowledging our weakness that we will come to know God more fully. And that just might be the biggest change any of us can make.

Amen.