

1st Sunday of Lent “The Journey to a Right Relationship with God”

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Like a number of you, I love to hike trails during the summer. I love to camp out under the stars. I especially enjoy the occasional backpacking trip I might take to an Alpine lake in the cascades. You see, the thing about camping and the art of backpacking is that once you are on the trail a mile or two you begin to realize that most of your usual day to day concerns have begun to vanish. The beauty of nature and the fresh air take center stage and you rejoice when your phone is no longer in range for emails and texts. However, as you begin to enjoy the peace and quiet that comes from being unplugged from society there is a little voice in your head that gently reminds you to be careful. For instance, it is good to pay attention to the trail because if you trip on a root it is a long way to hobble back to the car. You also think over again what you have with you, making sure that you have what you need because there are no stores out there and Amazon Prime doesn't deliver. This is what I love about being out in nature. There is something therapeutic about it. All the things we think are important get swept aside in favor of the most basic matters like breathing, staying warm and dry, staying hydrated and such. When you are in the backcountry, all you have to rely on at the end of the day is your training, equipment, your fellow hikers (choose them well), and most of all, a good and gracious God.

We begin the season of Lent with the Spirit of the Lord leading Jesus into the desert for fasting and prayer. And I think this is an important detail Luke points out: it wasn't an evil spirit that drove Jesus into the desert, it was the Holy Spirit. I think this is the best way for us to approach the season of Lent. God leads us here intentionally. And that desert is an interesting metaphor for Lent because a desert has a way of stripping away our usual daily concerns more so than a camping trip in the Cascades. The desert is a place where we are truly tested. And just like we might test out our gear in a safe environment before we find ourselves relying on it for survival, Lent is an opportunity to test our souls every year. You see the quality of our discipleship isn't always discernable when we are comfortable and well fed. It is only when we make our way into that desert, whatever that metaphor means for you, that we learn what our discipleship is made of.

And so when the Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the desert to fast and pray, that experience is meant to strip away from Jesus every concern except for the most basic value in life, a right relationship with God. We can read the three temptations in that light because all three temptations are attempts by the devil to steer Jesus away of that which is most important in life. And so, Jesus fasts for forty days and the Gospel says that afterwards he was hungry. Fair enough, right? However, notice that this is when the tempter appears, at the moment we are weakest, the moment we are most hungry. You can set your watch to it. That is when the test unfolds and we find out what we are made of. And the devil can sound so reasonable and he is very persuasive. You are hungry Jesus, why not simply turn that stone into bread? Jesus' response, “One does not live on bread alone”. This is a striking answer given that Jesus had been in the desert for forty days without food. What is Jesus' point here? The message is, as important

as food is for sustaining life, life itself is not possible in the first place without God. And so a right relationship with God is more important than even our physical needs. What does this mean for us? What this means is: the way we approach sensual pleasures like eating, drinking, whatever, they should always be congruent to our relationship with God rather than opposed. If any of our desires for sensual pleasure are out of sync with our relationship with God or outright opposed for that matter, we would be failing this first test of the desert of purification and enlightenment. During the season of Lent, it is good for us to abstain from whatever sensual pleasures we are tempted to put ahead of our relationship with God.

In the next temptation, the devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world in a single instant and says, "I shall give to you all this power and glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I may give it to whomever I wish. All this will be yours, if you worship me." So it seems that after sensual pleasures, the next temptation the devil will use on us is the thirst for power and glory. Again, like food, there is nothing wrong with being successful. It is just that, in the desert of purification and enlightenment, our quest for success in life should never come at odds with our primary and most important desire which is a right relationship with God, and this means following God's will for us rather than our ego's will. This is why Jesus responds, "It is written: *You shall worship the Lord, your God, and him alone shall you serve.*" During the season of Lent, we are invited here to be cautious of worldly success. This is because first and foremost, as disciples of Jesus, success isn't defined by the world. As Jesus says in another place, what good is it to gain the whole world and lose our soul in the process? Even the Lord's Prayer invites us to pray, "Thy will be done" not "my will be done". Success as a disciple of Jesus means allowing God's will to be followed in our life regardless of what the world thinks.

In the final temptation Jesus is led to the parapet of the temple. That image alone is striking because the temple is the place where you worship God. So, by placing Jesus on top of the temple, on the parapet, the devil appears to be tempting Jesus to make himself a higher value than God. The devil says, go ahead Jesus and jump. The scriptures say that God will save you. Jesus says in reply, "It also says, you shall not put the Lord, your God to the test". Jesus says this because he rejects the idea of being placed as a value higher than God and so should we. So it seems that after the temptation to sensual pleasure and the temptation for worldly power and glory, the third temptation goes for broke, tempting us to see the universe as revolving around us rather than us being in orbit around God. During the season of Lent, we can discern all the ways we are tempted to make God secondary to our needs, wants, and desires, placing ourselves on the parapet of the Temple at the expense of a right relationship with God. The desert of purification and enlightenment helps us see our proper place in the world around us by stripping away everything that doesn't keep God first in our lives.

I am always intrigued by Luke's account of the temptation in the desert that it says, "When the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him for a time." This is unique to Luke's Gospel. When does the devil return in Luke? It is in chapter 22, when Satan enters Judas before betraying Jesus as the hour of darkness finally comes and the disciples are sifted like wheat. This is an important detail because everything we are doing during the season of Lent should be understood as a preparation for Jesus' passion, death and resurrection. When Passion

Sunday arrives this year, we will have either lived the season of Lent well or we will have lived it poorly. And so, we have the invitation this Sunday: to live Lent well this year. Let's do it. How? We accomplish this by following Jesus into the backcountry of Lent, a spiritual place of fasting and prayer, where every concern we have becomes secondary and in harmony with a right relationship with God.