

**March 1, 2020 – First Sunday in Lent, Year A**  
**The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC**  
**The Rev. Catherine L. Tatem**

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7   Psalm 32   Romans 5:12-19   Matthew 4:1-11

*Lent begins*

One of the questions of Lent (for me) came from the writings of a colleague; paraphrased: Lent is a season in which to look at our lives with searing honesty, realizing that “every choice we make shapes us and every action we take screams our identity to the heavens. Who are you?” (Andrew D’Angio White, 2/26/20, on Facebook)

We are made in God’s image; at first, one out of dust and one out of “a hunk of flesh” of the other, and we are called very good. God provides everything we need, and then some. In the beauty and abundance of Paradise, we want more. Oh, to be god-like, to know *everything*! It does not take much for us to submit to the grand temptation, and then to blame one another: he made me do it; she made me do it; *I* didn’t do it. None of the finger pointing will allow us to escape the choices that we make: one to disobey, one to offer, one to eat. We who are very good are broken.

In our brokenness, we are beloved still. God remains. Forty years in the wilderness with the Israelites, forty days in the desert with Jesus, forty days in Lent ... with

us. Jesus shows us how to live in the desert, a place without food or comfort, even in the taunting voice of temptation.

The devil tests Jesus, offering Jesus food, power, and authority. Bread (sustenance) after a forty day fast, power over death, and a kingdom after 40 days in the wilderness. The devil's mocking challenges begin with "If." Three times: "If you are the son of God," and the devil, the Tempter, already knows exactly who Jesus is. Some bible translations use the word "since" instead of "if. Since you are the son of God. The temptations are really about how the son of God is supposed to act. *How does the son of God act in the face of:*

Food, when he is famished;

Life, as he plunges to his death;

Authority and power, if he accepts the kingdom offered to him.

One broad view way to interpret these temptations is through the lens of the great commandment from the book of Deuteronomy (6:5).

*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,*

*and with all your soul,*

*and with all your might.*

Loving the Lord God with all our heart. In the ancient world, the heart is the place from which we make moral decisions. Jesus, most likely very hungry after forty days, does not give in to the devil's taunt to stones into bread. Surely God's son could do that. Jesus answers with a shortened version of this passage:

Deut 8:2-3 “<sup>2</sup>Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. <sup>3</sup>He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”

In other words, God provides, and it is more than physical food that brings us life; God sustains us in every way.

The challenge to jump off the temple is a challenge sort of like a divine circus act. Summon your angels, Jesus! Jesus' reply is that we do not honor God by testing God. And that throwing ourselves off the temple is, frankly, a stupid risk of our life, a mockery of true martyrdom, and a mockery of Jesus' coming sacrifice/death. Do not cheapen the value of life. Why would we “test” God, the giver of

everything that we have, even life itself? A theatre stunt looks rather silly held against the sanctity of life.

“All these [kingdoms] I will give you ... if you bow down to me.”

*Love the Lord your God with all your might.*

“Might” is a word for possessions. Love the Lord your God with all of your possessions. Uh, oh. This one is especially difficult for us. Perhaps we need to hear again God’s reminder of living in fine cities that we did not build, having possessions (“stuff”) that we did not buy, water for which we did not dig, and gardens that we did not plant\*(from Deuteronomy, below).

“When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, <sup>11</sup>houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, <sup>12</sup>take care that you do not forget the Lord.”

We do forget our Lord. We forget the gifts that we have been given. And the devil knows how powerful our “stuff” is: “Here, Jesus, have it all.” Worship evil and you will have everything that you want.

Oh, how hard it is to remember the Lord our God! Lent is a concentrated time of remembering, of turning away from ourselves and to the Lord our God. Our “desert time” is meant to leave us famished for the Word of God, famished for Jesus to enter into life with us and to stay with us. Lent is only a little bit about what we give up, and what we might give up, abstain from, is to help us remember the sacrifice of Jesus. If what we give up becomes a battle for power (I can do this longer than you can), or glory (Look what I’ve done!), give up the false sacrifice. Eat the M&Ms. Instead of muscling our way through our Lenten practices, submit to them with joy; in so doing, we are submitting ourselves to God. That is the hard work of Lent. To be mindful, soul-searching, and obedient with JOY.

We go back to the question: who are you? What actions am I screaming to the heavens? ... Jesus’ temptations were about how the son of God is supposed to act; how is a child of God and a Christian supposed to act? What we do with power, with the sanctity of life, and with temptations of authority say something about who we are. This Lent, remember whose we are and how we want to show gospel love to the world. Recommit to some spiritual practices:

Fast. Put our electronics down, and fast from constant stimulation; deny ourselves the idea that we need to be available to everyone, all the time. We fast from our own perceived self-importance, from feeling that we must, indeed, be “on call” all the time. We do not. Turning off the TV is a fast. Not eating is a fast. Not talking about other people – gossiping – is a fast. Fasting is a reminder that we are nothing without – not all of those other *things* – but without God. “You are dust and to dust you shall return.”

Pray. I wonder what would happen if every one of us prayed every day. The Lord’s prayer. Or the simplest of prayers: “Maranatha,” “come, Lord Jesus.” Or simpler: “God, help.” Practice praying every day.

Read and meditate on God’s holy word. What if we meditated for the next forty days on the shortest verse in the bible? “Jesus wept.” Pray that verse this Lent. Meditate only that verse if you “don’t have time” for anything else. “Jesus wept,” with all of its questions and nuances, will change your life.

Remember whose we are, who created and gifted us with everything that we have. We are caretakers, beloved, embraced, broken, holy children of God.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Deuteronomy 6:5