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All Saints Episcopal Church

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

In case you missed it, we began a new liturgical season last Wednesday – a change from Epiphany, by way of Mardi Gras, into Lent. In the ancient church Lent was a time when new converts were instructed in the faith in preparation for Baptism on Easter Eve. The season brings a dramatic shift in the mood and tone of the church year, from a focus on light and miraculous encounters with Jesus, to a period of getting back to basics, of encounters with the humanity of Jesus, of repentance and of getting ready for the mystery of Easter.

The Gospel lesson for the first Sunday in Lent in all three years of the lectionary is an account of Jesus being tested by the devil. That makes sense, since the Gospel lesson for the first Sunday in Epiphany in all three years is the account of the baptism of Jesus. In the baptism accounts, Jesus receives his vocation when a voice declares him to be God’s Beloved Son, in whom God is well pleased.

In the accounts of testing, which immediately follow the baptism, an adversary addresses Jesus using those words, “*If*…” or, depending on which translation you read, “*Since* you are the Son of God…” – then proposes specific tests to find out whether or not Jesus really is such. So the Gospel story today is about who Christ is and whether he will be faithful to his vocation, and, it is also about who we are and our vocations.

All of the tests in this story have to do with Jesus’ identity as Son of God. Back in

the day, a son represented his father, and in the Old Testament a king was sometimes called God’s son, meaning that he represented God on earth and that he was obedient to God. As the son of God, the king had earthly power and earthly possessions. So here, the meaning of the words “You are my Son,” spoken to Jesus at his baptism, are at issue in our testing story.

The three tests have to do with earthly power and glory, and the dialogue in each test has a sort of stylized form to it. The Holy Spirit has just announced that Jesus is the Son of God, so the tester pounces on that first. “If you are the Son of God, prove it,“ he says. “Command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”

Jesus replies, “It is written, ‘One will not live by bread alone.’”

In the second test, the tester says, “Here are all the kingdoms of the world; if you will worship me, all this will be yours and I’ll give you all the power that goes with ruling them.”

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

Finally, the tester takes Jesus up to the very top of the Temple in Jerusalem and says, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down and let the angels catch you.” And before Jesus can reply, the tester tries to one-up Jesus by saying, “It is written,” and then he cites two places in the Psalms where the writers describe the promise of God’s protection.

But Jesus smiles and shakes his head, saying, “It is also written, ‘Don’t put the Lord your God to the test.’”

There is a double meaning in Jesus’ answer about not putting the Lord to the test. First, Jesus says, “I can’t jump off the roof to test God to see if God will rescue me; the Bible says I shouldn’t do that.” The second meaning is that Jesus knows the tester knows that Jesus is the Son of God; so Jesus tells him, “It’s not OK to test me either, because I am the Son of God.”

By refusing to do what the tests asked of him, Jesus remained faithful to his Baptismal vocation. All three tests have one thing in common, the enticement to be a messiah of unequalled power on earth – one who could provide food in abundance, who could reign over the kingdoms of the earth, and who could demonstrate that he is so invincible that nothing can harm him, since God will protect him from any harm.

Notice that throughout this sermon, I have used the terms ‘test’ and ‘tester’ instead of ‘temptation’ and ‘tempter.’ The reason is because the English word ‘temptation’ has so many connotations referring to human appetites that bring pleasure – think of synonyms such as alluring, enticement, and seduction - (we can thank the Puritans for that). The Greek word used here has to do with testing, so it makes sense to say that Jesus was tested.

Here is the point where we talk about how today’s lesson is about us – about who we are. Like Jesus, we often struggle with what it means to be children of God. As individuals, as a congregation, and as the larger Christian community – we are often tempted to seek out ways to follow Jesus that make us look good, or that will give us more influence and popularity; that will make us more attractive and make people want to become a part of our community – as if winning people for Christ were the same thing as winning an election.

But Jesus’ time in the wilderness teaches us it’s not. Just as Jesus was tested concerning his baptismal vocation, we, as Christians, are tested concerning ours. When we are baptized we are named as children of God – as God’s beloved. And immediately, the Spirit leads us into the wilderness and the testing begins. The tester asks us as he asked Jesus, “You are God’s beloved. Now what are you going to do about it?”

What are we going to do in response to the God who loves us enough to become one of us in order to show us how to love one another?

I can say without a shadow of a doubt that God doesn’t really care if we give up chocolate or TV or alcohol or cigarettes or cursing or any of the other things we try and, like New Year’s resolutions, fail within the first week.

Hear instead the words of Ash Wednesday:

*Is not this the fast that I choose:*
*to loose the bonds of injustice,* *to undo the thongs of the yoke,*
*to let the oppressed go free,* *and to break every yoke?*
*Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,*
*and bring the homeless poor into your house;*
*when you see the naked, to cover them,*
*and not to hide yourself from your own kin?*
*Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,*
*and your healing shall spring up quickly.*

If we are to be a people who have bread to share with the hungry, we must challenge those who would balance our budgets on the backs of the least of these.

If we are to let the oppressed go free, we must speak out against the politicians and policies that enshrine and proclaim fear, division and polarization.

If we are to choose the fast that God chooses, we must break the yokes of racism and sexism; of Islamophobia and homophobia; of every ‘ism and ‘phobia that keeps our country and our church and our world from being what God wants them to be.

And if we are to be obedient to our baptismal covenant, we must advocate for just immigration and living wage policies that will truly respect the dignity of every human being. (Susan Russell)

As we begin this Lenten season, may we know that we are unreservedly loved by the God who loves us completely and who asks in return that we love completely everybody else the way that God loves us. It’s simple. Don’t be tempted to make it more complicated than that. Resist the temptation.

Another world is possible – a world of peace and justice and wholeness for all creation. Amen.