

Lent1_YrA_031311_mcr
All Saints Episcopal Church

In the name of God. Amen.

Last Sunday we began the transition from the season of Epiphany to the season of Lent. We heard the familiar reading about Jesus on the mountain when Moses and Elijah appeared and Jesus' clothing and face were transfigured. The voice of God came through the clouds, telling the disciples who were there that Jesus was God's son and to listen to him. Jesus now begins his public ministry.

On Ash Wednesday, we continued the transition by shifting our focus from stories about the outward manifestations of God's presence with us (Emmanuel) to a more inward attitude as we begin the journey with Jesus to the cross and, of course, to the resurrection.

So today is the first Sunday of Lent. Thirty-five out of forty days and forty nights to go (not counting Sundays) until Easter. And what better way for Jesus to start his ministry than to be taken out into the wilderness to be tested. It is one of the very familiar stories about Jesus in our season of Lent. Let's listen to some new words with our old ears and perhaps we will have some new thoughts about this story:

From The Message:

Next Jesus was taken into the wild by the Spirit for the Test. The Devil was ready to give it. Jesus prepared for the Test by fasting forty days and forty nights. That left him, of course, in a state of extreme hunger, which the Devil took advantage of in the first test: "Since you are God's Son, speak the word that will turn these stones into loaves of bread."

Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy: "It takes more than bread to stay alive. It takes a steady stream of words from God's mouth."

For the second test the Devil took him to the Holy City. He sat him on top of the Temple and said, "Since you are God's Son, jump." The Devil goaded him by quoting Psalm 91: "He has placed you in the care of angels. They will catch you so that you won't so much as stub your toe on a stone."

Jesus countered with another citation from Deuteronomy: "Don't you dare test the Lord your God."

For the third test, the Devil took him to the peak of a huge mountain. He

gestured expansively, pointing out all the earth's kingdoms, how glorious they all were. Then he said, "They're yours—lock, stock, and barrel. Just go down on your knees and worship me, and they're yours."

Jesus' refusal was curt: "Beat it, Satan!" He backed his rebuke with a third quotation from Deuteronomy: "Worship the Lord your God, and only him. Serve him with absolute single-heartedness."

The Test was over. The Devil left. And in his place, angels! Angels came and took care of Jesus' needs.

Now, just so you'll know, the Devil here is not a red guy with horns and a pointy tail, a pitchfork and an evil grin. He is, however, the embodiment of the powers of this world - that is, the institutions, systems and forces that seek to make us powerless in the face of the enormity of the world's problems. The tests the Devil puts Jesus through prepare Jesus for what he will be up against when he leaves the desert: powers that use domination and violence in order to get their own way. They are the powers he resists in the wilderness and they are the powers that will eventually crucify him.

In the first temptation, Jesus has just been fasting for a long time. The Devil tells him he can use his power to turn stones into bread. How tempting, indeed? He was famished and weak - he could ensure his own survival with a mere wave of his hand! But Jesus speaks a word of Scripture to the powers, telling the Devil that one cannot live by bread alone. He does not give over his body and soul to the false security of the powers of this world. Jesus knows - and we know - that people need God's word as well as bread to survive. Jesus could have guaranteed his own survival, but there would have been no need for the cross.

In the second temptation, the Devil urges Jesus to tempt God by throwing himself off the top of the temple so that God's angels will come and save him. If this were to happen, people would see and know that he is the Son of God. Here the Devil is at his best: the powers of this world claim to have God on their side -- and make their power, their political ends and their way of seeing the world God's way of seeing the world, whether it really is God's way or not. The Devil tries to one-up Jesus by quoting Scripture to him first. This is a not-so-subtle reminder that if the Bible is in the wrong hands, even it can be used as a weapon opposing the will of God. But, Jesus says no again. If he had said yes, there would have been no need for the cross.

In the last temptation, the Devil invites Jesus to use his power to create his own political system using the ways of the world. Jesus can have all the power and domination he wants if he will bow down to the Devil. It's all yours, the Devil says, as long as you worship me. If he does so, Jesus will be the "King of Kings of the kingdoms of this world" (Neil Alexander) but Jesus refuses to use the violence and domination required. "The only weapon Jesus uses against the powers of this world is the Word: the only sword Jesus ever uses is the sword of the Spirit."
(Alexander)

So once more, Jesus says no. If he had said yes - if he'd adopted the ways of the world -- there would have been no need for the cross.

This Gospel is important for us because it helps us see that Jesus resists the powers of this world, beginning immediately after his baptism and lasting right up to his crucifixion. Jesus continually says 'no' to their ways, to their beliefs, and to their false promises. Jesus threatens their authority. The powers of this world are committed to their survival at all costs; they are committed to domination that comes by the sword; they must put to death the one who threatens their values. The powers can only deliver destruction and death. Only Jesus can deliver life.

This Gospel is important for us because it lays the foundation for all that Jesus is about during his ministry. In this story we can see the conflict between the ways of this world and the ways of God...between the way of death and the way of life...between the way of darkness and the way of light. And in the middle of it all is the cross.

In these days of Lent, we live between temptation and crucifixion. Jesus resists every temptation that the devil offers. And Jesus resists because he sees what is coming. He can see that the temptations are stumbling blocks on the path to Jerusalem. He knows that with the resistance of each temptation he is taking a step towards the cross. But he continues to move forward.

So the question for us now is how then shall we live? We all struggle with the powers of this world. We all know, as Jesus knows, that many times it is easier to choose power, violence and domination instead of the justice, mercy and love of the reign of God. We all know, as Jesus knows, that it is easier to pick up the stones we find in our wilderness and throw them at each other than to sit down together to share the bread that brings life.

Will we choose the way of the Devil or the way of Jesus?

As we walk the path from temptation to crucifixion during these next 35 days, let it be with our eyes and ears and hearts wide open. Listen for Jesus, as The Voice told the disciples on the mountain. He will call out to us on the path as he makes his way from temptation to crucifixion. He will call out to us from the cross. And in the midst of death, domination and violence, we will hear his voice: "Choose life," he will say. "Choose life!"