

Feb 6 08 Ash Wednesday Luke 4:1-13

Temptation of Jesus

Tonight is the beginning of Lent. Lent as we know it today, is usually a period of 40 days of fasting and abstinence. It is a time to reflect on the cross and the suffering and pain that Jesus suffered as he made his way to the cross of Calvary. For those who don't want to fast or abstain, I challenge you to take time each day to read your Bible. Maybe your lunch break, or before you leave for work, or at the end of the day. Read the Gospels starting with Matthew. Take time daily to talk with God and walk with him.

Tonight I've chosen as our Scripture lesson Jesus' battle in the wilderness. You see, like Ash Wednesday is the beginning of Lent, this wilderness journey for Jesus was the beginning of his journey to the cross.

Listen as I read the account of those temptations from the *Message* translation found in the Gospel of Luke.

Have you ever been tempted? I bet you have. Perhaps temptations come across your paths daily. Oh, some of them don't look too dangerous, but they are there. Hey, if you are on a diet, just walk into a McDonald's or some other fast food place and be tempted by their menu or those smells. Ever walk near the food court in the mall? Sometimes those smells just might drive you wild. Trying to watch the stuff I eat, sometimes those donuts or cinnamon roll smells just drive me

wild. Or just go out to eat and look at all those goodies you can have. The other day on the way home from our retreat my friend and I stopped in Litchfield to eat. When we were through the waitress brought a tray of those delicious desserts they were pedaling trying to tempt our pallets. And on the way out right before you got out the door, there in a case where all those nice looking home made cakes and pies. They were hard to resist. I thought my buddy was going to stop and buy one, but I pushed him out the door.

You know that guy with the pitch fork prowls around like a lion just putting one temptation after the other in the path of people hoping they'll take the bait.

When we were living in Roanoke our neighbor had a nice garden next door and she would share her tomatoes and other veggies with us. One day I saw her putting out a trap trying to catch some rabbits that were getting into that garden and eating the produce. I often laughed thinking about the nursery rhyme and how the mom warned her little ones not to go into Mr. McGregor's' garden. I would see one of those rabbits sniffing it's way to her garden and I would yell out in a lousy Scottish accent, "You better not go into Mrs. McGregor's garden or you will be doomed.' But our neighbor would always release those rabbits later on in wilderness in Roanoke near their farm. When I would see our neighbor working in her garden I would always call "Good morning, Mrs. McGregor." This year I

found some rabbits nesting in my garden, but I could never catch them. I just let them be.

You see, Satan tries to tempt us.

Look at Jesus. There he is in the wilderness all alone. He has been there 40 days and 40 nights and folks he was getting hungry. He didn't have anything to eat or drink. He was at the lowest part of his life. This was the time Satan thought he was vulnerable. He perhaps figured this was the time that Jesus would do anything or give anything for just a piece of bread or a sip of cool water. Satan saw how down Jesus was. He saw him at the low ebb of his life and he figured he had him in the palm of his hands. So he offers him a solution to the problem of being hungry.

Look what he does. He says, "Now Jesus, I know and you know you are the Son of God. Therefore, nothing is impossible with you. If you want you can end this hunger. If you want you can end this thirst. You have the power to do that. All you have to do is command one of these stones to become a loaf of bread and you will have some nourishment. Look, over there, look at that stone, it is nice and round, and the color reminds me of the color of a loaf of bread. I can almost smell that wonderful smell as if it just came from the oven. Just speak to the stone and your hunger pains will be gone."

You ever been like that? There are people out there in this world that perhaps have been as hungry as Jesus. We read about them all the time, don't we. And they are not just in foreign countries either. Some are in our own country, in our own neighborhoods. And when they are down to their last piece of food maybe Satan puts temptations in their way as well. Maybe he persuades them to steal from someone. Maybe he tempts them to go into a store and take something off the food rack, or rob the store. No one will notice. Just be careful of the security cameras. And what happens? They get caught and they have to pay the price.

It's tough to fight off temptations. Don't believe me? Ask someone who is battling drug addiction. Ask someone who is battling an alcohol problem.

I know of a wonderful girl who is from a fine Christian family that has been battling her alcohol problem for some time. No one knew she had one. But it came to light one day recently and she ended up losing her marriage and her job. She ended up getting help and it looked like it was helping until the holidays came and she had a relapse. She has no family around her and can't seem to find a job that will occupy some of her time. She is lonely and depressed and Satan knows just the right buttons to push in order for her to fall. Carole and I pray for her to be strong. We pray that she will be able to stand the wicked darts in Satan's arsenal. It's tough to be dependant on something like drugs and alcohol. And Satan just provides more of that stuff in your medicine cabinet or at the local super market.

Jesus looked at that stone that looked like bread and it might have been appealing, but he would not fall to Satan's folly. He told him, "Satan, you can try and trick me, but let me remind you we don't live by bread alone. No! It takes more than bread for anyone to really live. It takes faith in God."

Next Satan took him up to a high mountain spot and showed him the wonders of the world. Satan said, "Jesus, look out as far as you can see. Look and see the splendor of this universe. This is my kingdom. Now if you will come join me I will give you a portion of this kingdom, or I can give you the whole thing. What do you say? We can make a great team. Me and you working together we can do so much and have so much. All you need to do is acknowledge me and worship me."

You know there are lots of people out there being tempted with power things. In the past years we have seen what has happened to great big industries as some of the powerful abused their power. The temptation to be greater was too much for them. Some stole from their companies. As it is said some sold their souls in order to be rich, famous and powerful.

You see, Satan knows every person's weakness. Some have a problem resisting food. Some have the problem with wanting to get ahead, to be rich, or even be famous. We sometimes see that during election times. We hear all kinds of promises from politicians. They tell us what we generally want to hear so that

we will vote for them. They promise you the moon. And sometimes they mean to give it to us, but then, well, once elected they seem to change. Some seem to fall in the trap like all the others. They throw you a bone from time to time, but, hey, making big changes? Well.... Even today we need to wait and see. I'm sure Satan is working extra hard these days in the lives of many a politician.....

Jesus looks around at his surroundings and says, "You know, this might be your kingdom. But I want to remind you of one thing. This really is my Father's world. You may think you are in charge but you can't do anything unless my Father lets you. You have limited power. You might be able to try and ruin people like you did Job, but like Job, there are many faithful followers of my Father that will not fall to your shenanigans. You can tempt me with all of this, but I want to remind you the only one I'm going to worship is my Father in heaven and he has given all of this to me anyway. You might have it for a time. But one day you are out of here for good."

And finally, Satan trying desperately to get Jesus to fall from grace, takes him to the highest point in Jerusalem. He takes him to the Temple where God's people worship and he says, "Now Jesus, I know that God takes care of you. I know that he loves you and will not let you be hurt. I tell you what. Why not prove that to me and the world. Just take a few steps forward and fall toward the earth and let's see how far you fall until God's angels come to snatch you up."

There are people who walk like that too. They like to live close to the edge. They like to come close, hoping not to cross over. They are like the dog who is on a leash that can go just so far before he is restrained. But one day that leash might just brake and what is he going to do with all that freedom? Little white lies, cheating on little stuff, just a few puffs on a mariwana weed, just a taste from that whisky bottle, just a little time staring at the porno sight in my own home, it can't hurt. We sometimes tempt God thinking he will pull us back when we get to the end of our leash. But one day it may not happen and you will be free to do what you want and bingo... a fall.

Well we know what happened when Satan tried that stuff on Jesus. He responded to Satan once again telling him, "Listen my man, even I don't tempt my Father. We are told to trust in him, not to tempt him. So you might as well just go away because even though I am weak and I am hungry, I'm trusting in my Father to provide all I need when I need it."

So, as the word of God says, Satan took off and left Jesus in the dessert. But he had not given up. He would wait to another day, another moment when Jesus was once again at his weakest. The *Message* translation in Luke says, "That completed the testing. The Devil retreated temporarily, lying in wait for another opportunity."

My friends, this testing of Jesus in the wilderness speaks volumes to us as well as we begin our Lenten trip to the cross. You see, Satan tries to mess with our bodies by getting us ill. He messes with our minds trying to have us doubt stuff. He messes with our faith trying to tell us that this religious stuff is a bunch of hooley. He then tries to trick you into believing all that stuff. He tries to trick you into believing that God doesn't love you. He attacks you in such a way because he wants you to become angry with God. I have seen that happen. Things happen in ones life and you get angry with God and you want to blame God. You see, if we continue to play the blame game with God then Satan hopes we will walk away from our God. He hopes we will abandon our faith and turn to him. He is banking on the fact that if he provides us with just a few things, then one day we will sign a contract with him exchanging some simple pleasures for our souls. For if he can destroy your faith then he has got you. If he can get you to turn your back on God, then he knows he can destroy others as well.

My friends, Satan is real. Temptations are real. Jesus faced them. And you want to know something. Satan kept waiting and watching for just the right time to attack Jesus when he was the most vulnerable. Think about how Jesus' disciples ran off when the guards came to arrest him. Think about Judas betraying Jesus with the kiss of death. Think about Peter denying Jesus 3 times. Think about Pilate giving him over to the people to be crucified even though he could not find

anything to crucify him for. They wanted Barabbas released, not Jesus. And he was there at the trials, and then at the cross. Oh how the people would have believed if he came down from that cross that day. After all, they told him if he came down from the cross they would believe. How tempting that might have been. But if he had salvation would have been non-existent.

But it was not to be. At every step of his life Jesus was strong because he walked close to the Father. He left all things in his hand. When those temptations came, he fought the good fight and trusted in the one who gave him this life and a mission to do.

Tonight, though we as United Methodists do believe in giving of ashes, I don't offer you ashes for your forehead. I offer you faith in Jesus. I offer you a time to come to this altar to be anointed with oil so that you will be able to walk these next 6 weeks in the footsteps of Jesus with the same power and strength that he had. For you see, he was able to do all of this because he was blessed by God and filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Hear once again the beginning of our Scripture lesson... "Now Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wild."

Tonight, you, full of the Spirit will be led into the wild of your own world.

And remember this, when you have victory after victory, don't forget that guy who talks with a forked tongue, even though he is defeated, he is still trying

his best to take down with him those whom he can destroy. Remember! Though you may not see or feel him, he is always there looking for an opportune moment to destroy your faith. Folks he is sneaky. As I said, he prowls around like a lion. He sneaks around like the snake in the grass that he is, and when you least expect him, he raises his ugly head and strikes.

Let me conclude with words from the origin of Ash Wednesday; “Putting a ‘cross’ on the forehead was an invitation to receive the spiritual mark or seal that is put on a Christian at baptism. This is when the newly born Christian is delivered from slavery to sin and the devil and made a slave of righteousness and Christ.”

So this Ash Wednesday as we begin the season of Lent remembering the way of the cross I offer you the sign of the cross with the anointing with oil to remind you of the power you have through the Holy Spirit to live a Christian life to resist temptation. And remember this. Even when you fall. You don’t have to remain in a fallen state. There is forgiveness to those who seek redemption. There is cleansing for those who seek salvation. That’s called God’s Grace.

I pray these next days and weeks we will have a better appreciation of your salvation. It wasn’t cheap grace that kept Jesus nailed to the cross. It was his love.

I pray we will walk the walk that leads to victory and the blessings of Easter morning. So shall it be, amen.