

1st Sunday of Lent “A Spiritual Hike”

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When I was younger, I loved to backpack and camp out under the stars. You probably wouldn't think that looking at me, but it is true. The thing about 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 hope that you have what you need because there are no stores out there and Amazon Prime doesn't deliver. This is what I loved about backpacking. 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 can rely on 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. The 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 because 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 spiritual desert that we learn what our discipleship is really made of.

When the Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the desert to fast and pray, that experience is meant to strip away from Jesus every earthly 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 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. However, notice that this is when the tempter appears, when we are at our 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. 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, fill in the blank, whatever sensual pleasure you can think of, they all should be congruent to our relationship with God rather than opposed. 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 own when the two conflict. 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 in his humanity 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 our earthly life as being a value higher than God, and so should we. It therefore 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 and the Church. 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 instead of inside it.

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. That is where Lent is leading us. We have the invitation this Sunday to follow Jesus out into the desert and become totally dependent on him. What does it look like to put everything in our lives as secondary to a relationship with Jesus? Our answer to that question might make us uncomfortable. However, if we are not somewhat uncomfortable during the season of Lent, we aren't doing it correctly. All our spiritual disciplines in this liturgical season are meant to strengthen us in our desire to follow Jesus who alone knows the backcountry path to salvation.