

This Lent be human

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16, Romans 10:4-13, Luke 4:1-15.

Today, the first Sunday in Lent, we join Jesus in the desert, where he spent forty days wrestling with "Satan's" temptations. Our journey begins in the desert, in the place of nothing and emptiness. In the crucible of heat and sand, Jesus was trying to figure out, "what it meant to be Jesus." Mark's Gospel says he was driven into the wilderness. Luke's account says he was filled with the Holy Spirit and then led by the same Spirit into the wilderness. Whatever their discrepancies and differences all the Gospel accounts lead to one end – the cross and the resurrection. Looming before Jesus and us are those Passover events that will redefine how we view God, each other and death itself.

Lent is a journey towards the cross. And towards a tomb, and the mysterious, unending joy of those who found that tomb empty. On Easter morning after we have sat with the suffering of Good Friday we will light the tall, white Paschal candle and someone will sing, "The light of Christ." Lent is a journey, as a biblical scholar put it, from ashes to fire. Today's gospel puts us in the place of aloneness, hunger and weariness. Here Jesus is tempted –to take a different path from the one laid out before him. The devil put before him these three temptations: if you are hungry, change stones into bread. If you are the son of God, leap from a tower and rely on angels to rescue you. If you bow down before me, all the kingdoms of the world will be yours.

The scriptures have various ways to describe the power of evil in the world – it is portrayed as tendencies within ourselves, it is represented as a powerful angel gone astray, it is described as a cosmic power or organized forces arrayed against the will of God and the will of humans. However it is portrayed, Scripture and experience agree that there is in us and among us strong opposition to love, health, wholeness and peace. We just need to look at the world around us and our own situations to know this truth. A London newspaper sought the help of its subscribers in addressing this problem of evil. Readers were invited to send in their responses to the question, what is wrong with the world today? The best response of all was also the briefest. It read, *Dear Sir, I am. Yours faithfully, G.K. Chesterton.* Whatever evil is, it manifests in **our** thoughts and actions. It is pointless to point the finger at someone else, or something else. The first place to look is within me, within us. And it is to our strengths that we need to pay the closest attention.

Temptation, that pull to a negative action or thought, that we will later regret, is an indication of strength not of weakness. We are not tempted to do what we cannot do but what is within our power. What makes the temptations that Jesus undergoes so riveting to the Christian reader is that we know he can pull off what Satan is enticing him to do. Since he is the Son of God he **can** turn stones to bread, he **can** use the power of God to save him from death and he can use his own power to rule the world. The greater the strength the greater the temptation. What a struggle Jesus must have faced! Can you imagine it? In this story we get an insight into the character and quality of Jesus, qualities that he is going to need in spades as his destiny approaches.

For us temptation is more mundane affair. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it "*When it's our turn, none of us is going to get the Son of God test. We're going to get the regular old Adam and Eve test, which means that the devil won't need much more than an all-you-can-eat*

*buffet and a tax refund to turn our heads”*¹. Our temptation will not be to the same degree as those Jesus faced but they are no less difficult and distressing. It is also deceptive. Sometimes temptation beckons us to do some things about which a lot of good could be said. Stones to bread? The hungry hope so. Take political control? The oppressed hope so. Leap from the temple? Those among us longing for proof of God’s power or even his existence hope so. All this is to say that a real temptation is an offer, not to fall but to rise. The tempter in that ancient Eden story did not ask, “Do you wish to be as the devil” but “Do you wish to be as God?”

So perhaps we need to look at our personal strengths, not what we believe are our weaknesses. In our strengths too live the seeds of temptation. Perhaps we are very competent and skilled at our job. Everyone affirms us in that. Pats us on the back. Wants more of our skills and time and expertise. But while we are succumbing to the power and the glory other things or people in our life are suffering – like our husband or wife, or our children or even our dog or cat. Perhaps we are clear thinkers and are able to see problems and solutions. We can tell what other people need to do to get things sorted out. It is all so obvious we take over, manipulate and control. We ‘do good’ with such conviction that we stifle another person’s freedom and creativity. Maybe we are good providers. We are able to provide a comfortable existence to our families, all the good things in life. But maybe we become so enamored of these material treasures that we store them up, guard and hoard them, and then spend the rest of our time worrying about them and protecting them.

And our hearts are empty and our relationships shallow and the earth cries out.

Temptation leads us down many paths but ultimately fruitless ends. If I had what she has, I would be? Her. Not me. If I were famous I would be: still me, only famous, but with another whole set of problems. If I had a new lover then I would be? Blissful, for a while, and then he, too, would probably neglect to pick up the towels in the bathroom.

Although the degree is different the temptations that confronted Jesus can be the same ones that confront us – the temptation to power, the temptation to materialism and the temptation to not let God be God in our lives. Perhaps all these temptations can be summed up as the temptation to not be human. Just prior to this scene Jesus has been declared by God to be his son, the beloved. Yet we affirm that Jesus was also fully human. The devil begins with the challenge – “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread”. That is, don’t be human, use your divine powers to not suffer hunger. Use your miraculous powers to rule the entire world and use your power to save yourself from death. (example of British woman)

But Jesus chooses to be human – to suffer and eventually to die. It is in fact in his complete humanness that Jesus can fulfill his task on the cross. How can he be the way, show us the way, unless he is truly one of us? I have long held to the belief that it was not a god interested in judgment who pinned Jesus to a cross but the scapegoating of a violent humanity. Jesus is the archetypal innocent victim who is vindicated and raised by God and who after the resurrection shows what forgiveness and new life is really about. How can he be the resurrected, loving, powerful, forgiving victim if he cannot weep and bleed as one of us?

I once asked a friend of mine who is a therapist how to stop projecting onto others my own fears and weakness, that is, how to love, and she said: “*You must enlarge your capacity to suffer.*” What she meant by that was that must own my own human reality and not project my

¹ http://day1.org/1756-the_wilderness_exam

discomfit, pain and grief onto others. I thought this was a challenging but ultimately true answer. We must enlarge our capacity to be human and that means to feel reality. To not run away from what confronts and disturbs us. To not blot out life with all its difficulties with addictions and distractions of various types. I mean, almost everyone uses something—if not drugs, then at least a favorite pacifier: romance novels, Facebook, and reruns of Mash, gardening catalogs or a glass of Grange hermitage.

Enlarging our capacity to suffer may not seem very attractive but I am not suggesting we suffer for the sake of suffering, or even so we can identify with Christ on the cross. I am not talking about denying ourselves treatment and medication for a painful illness. I am talking about become more aware of our pain and grief. For some of us with physical ailments that is an all too easy task. Our bodily pain screams out at us. But for many of us our grief, worries, desperation and fears are buried and we avoid them at all costs and project them onto the world around us. One more point about but enlarging our capacity to suffer, to be aware of our human reality. It is not about identifying with it for we are not our pain and grief, we are not our suffering. As Anthony De Mello puts it there are clouds in the sky but we are not the clouds, we are the sky.

Enlarging our capacity for suffering means to acknowledge and be home to our own pain and grief, our limitations, our humanness, which will come no matter what we do. One saying goes, "We don't have to choose suffering." If we choose to love we will suffer. One could also say, if we choose not to love we will still suffer. When we don't run away from the pain, when we enlarge our capacity to feel our heart breaking under the weight of being human, when our hearts become flesh and not stone, then paradoxically we automatically enlarge our capacity for love, joy, delight and compassion. As we increase our awareness of suffering we also increase our awareness of joy. Part of our Lenten disciplines – you know giving things up, taking things on – is about understanding, accepting and loving our humanness more and more.

The work of Lent is to rewrite the story by enlarging our capacity to take in the parts of ourselves that we always want to leave out: the parts that aren't so pretty, the messy and at times the ugly bits. It is to discover what itches and what our heart is telling us. The work of Lent is to journey with Jesus to the cross where we find suffering and sin transformed. And the work of Lent is to resist the temptation to be anything less than fully human. Only in our humanness can God's will be truly done. May our Lenten journey lead us to the fire of Easter and the rejuvenating love of God. Amen.