

Sermon: Lent 1

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Year C

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

Every year, once we are through January and well into February, a time of preparation comes around. It may involve some significant searching, maybe some suffering and, perhaps, even be accompanied by a pleasant sense of anticipation. It is a duty that most of us undertake with mixed feelings, I think. We don't always understand exactly why we go through the steps that we are taking, but we do it anyway. Yes, once again, it's income tax season. And, for Christians worldwide, it's also Lent.

Lent is a season that, I must admit, I don't completely understand, anymore than I completely understand the tax code. It seems to take different directions for almost each person, and, as one commentator noted, to an outsider, it really looks more like a diet than a religious exercise.

Lent is patterned after Christ's 40 days in the wilderness following his baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptizer, and before he began calling disciples and his public ministry. All three synoptic gospels tell of the time in the wilderness, but each account is different, although Matthew's and Luke's versions differ from each other only slightly. Mark, characteristically, makes short work of the baptism and the stay in the wilderness. The NRSV translation of Mark 1:9-13 says as follows:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him.

That's it. No specifics as to what was going on, nothing about specific temptations. Nothing! After this passage, Mark has Jesus calling his disciples.

With Matthew and with Luke, as you heard, there is slightly more detail. These two accounts are virtually identical except for the order of the temptations. Matthew has the temptation at the top of the temple second, while Luke has it third. It seems likely that both of the gospel writers used the document "Q" in crafting their narratives, according to Arlen Hultgren, Professor Emeritus of New Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul MN. Which one of the two was the correct version, according to "Q", and why the difference, no one that I read seems to know.

The Reverend Brian Erickson, senior pastor of First United Methodist Church in Alabaster, Alabama, examines Jesus's motivation for going into the wilderness. He notes that the motivation for Jesus's trip to the wilderness is not like that of Moses or Elijah. Christ didn't spend his forty days receiving a commission from God. He already was given that in the Jordan, at his baptism. No, rather than going to speak with God, Jesus went to face the devil. It doesn't seem to be something that Jesus decided to do on his own, either. Jesus recognized that facing temptation wasn't necessarily a good thing. When he teaches us to pray, He specifically says, "...and lead us not into temptation...." Mark is the most emphatic in the notion that this trip is not Jesus's idea. He says that the Spirit "drove" Christ into the wilderness. Both Matthew and Luke are a little less forceful. They have Jesus "led" by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted. I think that it is significant that both Matthew and Luke note that Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit that had descended upon him at baptism. Matthew Henry, an English Reformation-Era commentator on scripture wrote, in about the year 1700, "Christ being led into the wilderness gave an advantage to the tempter; for there he was alone, none

were with him by whose prayers and advice he might be helped in the hour of temptation. He who knew his own strength gave Satan advantage; but we may not who know our own weakness.” I think that this is a significant point in discussing the Lenten Season. Certainly, one of the the most important lessons that we can learn about ourselves is the extent and nature of our own weaknesses. From the three gospel accounts, we don’t know much about what occurred during the forty days that Christ spent in the wilderness. Matthew and Luke either state or imply that at the end of the forty days of fasting, the devil appeared with his three temptations. As we saw, Mark doesn’t list any specific temptations or mention a timeline. Professor Hultgren sees the three temptations in the wilderness as recalling the testing of the people of Israel during their forty years of wandering. Jesus’s scriptural responses to Satan from Deuteronomy are the lessons the Israelites learned in their wandering. The first temptation, turning stone into bread recalls the feeding of the people of Israel with mana to learn one does not live by bread alone. The second temptation, ruling all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus would worship Satan, recalls Moses’s message to the people of Israel as they were about to enter the promised land which was spoken to them in Deuteronomy 6:4, “The Lord is our God, the Lord alone”. Finally, the temptation to prove Christ’s relationship to God by jumping from the top of the temple recalls Moses’s warning not to test the lord as the Israelites did at Massah, the place of quarreling, when they demanded water and Moses finally obtained it by striking the rock. Professor Hultgren and other commentators focus not so much on the idea of temptation, but prefer to call the process one of testing. Christ was given his mission at his baptism, his time in the wilderness was to show that he was ready for that mission.

Some commentators, like David Lose, President of Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, choose to focus on the nature of the temptations. These are not designed to pull Jesus toward something he shouldn’t do as much as to destroy Jesus’s relationship with God, thereby attacking His identity as the Son of God. Lose writes, “Notice how each of the temptations seeks to erode and undercut Jesus’s confidence in his relationship with God and therefore undermine Jesus’s identity as the

Son of God.” Lose continues, “And in the face of these temptations, Jesus quotes the sacred story of Israel in order to assert that he is a part of that story and therefore reaffirm his identity as a child of God”. Lose characterizes the “temptations” in modern terms as an attempted identity theft.

But, what about us? During our Lenten time and beyond, will we face similar situations? Of course! Lose, keeping with his idea of Identity theft, only now focusing on OUR identities, points to advertisers who seek to undermine our position as children of God by constantly telling us that we aren’t worthy. We aren’t sufficient just as children of God, but with the right toothpaste, automobile, beverage and on and on and on, we will be surrounded with friends, socially acceptable and beloved by all who meet us. We really don’t need relationship with God to be happy, all we need is the right product to make us complete. Lose also points out that politicians use the same wedge to weaken our relationship with God. The candidates say, ”Don’t trust in God, only I can keep you safe from terrorists and those who would take your security, both political and economic.” It’s the same ploy that Satan tried to use when he said to Jesus, “IF you are the son of God”, make these stones into bread or cast yourself down from the top of the temple.

OK. We do, and we will continue to, face the day to day temptation to give up trusting in God, but what about today’s second temptation? You know, the one about the wealth and power of the nations of the world? That’s certainly not going to happen, right? Well, a couple of weeks ago, the Powerball Lottery prize was somewhere around \$1.5 billion. That, according to the CIA World Book, is more than the GDP, the total value of all goods and services produced in a country, of 26 nations, including Greenland, Somalia, the Cayman Islands, Djibouti and American Samoa, just to name a few. How many people do you know who bought a Powerball ticket? As Matthew Henry wrote some three hundred years ago, it is vital to know our weakness so as not to give Satan any advantage over us.