

Matthew 4:1-11 – Lent 1 – Lead Us Not Into Temptation – February 26, 2023

+In Nomine Jesu+

Lent begins with Jesus in the wilderness. He is led into solitude by the Spirit following His Baptism. Mark says that the Spirit *threw* Him out—*cast* Him out—out into the wilderness—the desert. Forty days alone—without food—fasting. His ministry begins in silence. Humble stillness. He is alone—but in union with the Word.

But this is not a sabbatical. It is a struggle. We might enjoy a forty-day retreat. But that is not what Jesus is doing. There are physical difficulties for Christ in all of this—hunger, exhaustion, isolation. But the real battle is spiritual.

Here, He handles the enticements of the devil. And it sounds a lot like we hear in the first temptation—in Eden. In the wilderness, the devil does what the devil does. He undermines the Word of God. The Father had just spoken at Jesus' Baptism, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

And in response, the first words from the devil questions that Word, "If you are the Son of God..." And then He tempts Jesus to prove Himself—as if the Word of the Father is not enough—to seek His own good, His own glory, His own standing.

In all of this, Jesus mirrors the Israelites in their wilderness wanderings—from Egypt to Sinai—from Sinai to the Promised Land. He bears God's name. He lives out Israel's vocation. He shows us how to wander in the wilderness with righteousness. He reenacts Israel's wilderness experience.

Matthew wants us to see Jesus as the new Israel. He is walking the same paths. He recreates Israel's story. And He maintains His faithfulness the whole way.

As Israel had experienced great hunger in the wilderness—and in their temptation, grumbled at God—so now Jesus perfects these moments of trial and temptation. He disciplines Himself. He resists the devil in this wilderness of sin. He did it for Israel, who had failed such tests. And He does it for us as well. This victory over temptation is crucial for our salvation—it is the active righteousness of Christ.

I wonder how we would do in such a situation—tempted by the devil after not eating for forty days? I get grumpy when I miss lunch. Resisting temptation grows more difficult when we are weary. Matthew even suggests that the temptation went on the whole time—all 40 days—not just at the end.

Jesus' fast brings substance to our practices in this season. We Lutherans often fast during Lent, although nothing is mandated here. Fasting, strictly speaking, is a believer's voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes. Now, we don't need to skip out on food for the next forty days. And you might want to talk with your doctor before trying something like that. We don't need to follow Jesus' example quite so precisely.

But we do fast. It is a biblical practice. In fact, you will find that fasting in the Bible is mentioned as often as Holy Baptism. For example, Daniel fasts as he reads the Prophet Jeremiah and repents on behalf of his people. Anna fasts as she waits for the coming of the Christ Child to the temple. In Acts, the church at Antioch fasts as it prepares to send off Saul and Barnabas as missionaries.

And fasting does have its own form of silence. Although we don't need to cut ourselves off from others for the next forty days. This is not some darkness retreat. Instead, Jesus expects us to keep our fasts to ourselves. Remember what we heard on Ash Wednesday—and He says basically the same thing about our giving and our prayers.

Jesus says, “And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Traditionally, the Lenten disciplines are prayer, fasting, and giving. And these activities help us to reevaluate our lives. Back in Epiphany we looked at the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. We focused in on one especially to set before our eyes, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.” This requires some discipline in our thinking. It impacts our passions—what we love. And this really is the spirit of Lent.

One famous Christian thinker, Cornelius Plantinga, commented on this text as he talked about fasting. He said, “Self-indulgence is the enemy of gratitude, and self-discipline usually its friend and generator. That is why gluttony is a deadly sin. The early desert fathers believed that a person's appetites are linked: full stomachs and jaded palates take the edge from our hunger and thirst for righteousness. They spoil the appetite for God.”

When you think about it, few disciplines go so radically against the overindulgence of our time as this one. It crashes into our predilections to eat, drink, and be merry. And so, we fast in Lent. We practice self-control. It is part of the fruit of the Spirit, after all. “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” We bring our passions and desires in check.

Now, usually, fasting is in reference to those appetites of the body—food and drink. And this is a decent place to begin in Lent. This is what Jesus was doing. But I want to challenge you today—and for the rest of Lent—to practice a different discipline. Food or drink is fine. And if you have already started your fast, please continue.

But there is a second and broader concept of fasting. And I think it is also in keeping with our Gospel reading today. Remember, as Jesus keeps this 40-day fast, He does so while resisting temptation. And that is where I want to take us today. Not to some cosmic conflict with Satan. Christ alone can pull that off. Instead, let's use Lent to battle temptation.

And I want to suggest something very specific. And it goes back to the Israelites and how they conducted themselves in the wilderness. Maybe Numbers 21 is the best example of what I mean. Listen to the people grumble against Moses—although really, they are expressing their dissatisfaction with the God who rescued them out of slavery. Here, they say, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable bread.”

And so this is my suggestion. What if we fasted from grumbling in Lent? What if we took complaining and criticizing off of our plates for the next 40 days? What if we really changed the way we talked about our situations? What if we changed the way we talked about others?

Maybe Paul says it best in Philippians 2, “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Do all things without grumbling or arguing.”

That’s my challenge to you this year. Let’s fast from complaining and criticizing—in the church—in the home—and most especially, let’s eliminate our grumbling against God. Much of our complaining is actually directed His way, when we think about it.

Our Old Testament reading from a few weeks ago really got me thinking of this idea. The passage is Isaiah 58. Here the people confront God for not seeing their fast—for not appreciating their piety. The people ask of God, “Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?”

I guess they thought their fasting would merit grace. They wanted something out of it from God. But their fast was merely superficial. It was empty ritual. It wasn’t from a heart of faith. And it wasn’t something that benefited their neighbors. And now, God confronts them. And it is worth hearing as we enter Lent.

“Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the LORD? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?”

And so, let’s do that in Lent. Let’s loose the bonds of wickedness. Let’s follow the commandments of the Lord. Let’s give up complaining and criticizing. As we fast, let’s fast from sin. Complaining leads to seeing the worst in a particular situation or person. And often, we combat our evil thoughts most effectively if we absolutely refuse to allow them to be verbalized.

This is a difficult task—a hard habit to break. But maybe, we could express this more positively with Ephesians 4, “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.”

This might mean that things are seriously quieter. We might have a lot less to say. And maybe this also implies that we are being the kind of people that others need not complain about or criticize. Let’s begin with selfless behavior—knowing that others around you are making a conscience effort to restrain their sin too. Maybe, just maybe, life might look a little bit better for all of us.

So, will you join me? Will you do this with me? Let’s give up complaining and criticizing for Lent. So, no trolling around on social media. No unkind words under your breath as you walk out the door. No gossip in the parking lot. Don’t let complaints be the first things on your lips as you get home from work. See the blessings that God has given you in this life. And see God’s people around you as those who bear His image—as people for whom Christ died.

Lent is a time for fasting. Lent is a time for discipline. It is a time for sin to be restrained. The struggle is spiritual. In this journey, we are on our way to the cross. But Lent is also a time to see what Christ has done for us. We are on our way to the resurrection as well. And as we circle back around to Jesus, His perfection comes through. He resists temptation. He defeats the devil for us. He shows us how to wander in the wilderness in righteousness.

And in doing so, He gives us help in our temptations. Really, we have nothing to complain about. We have no need to criticize. Grumbling does not define us. We have all we need in Christ. And in the strength of Christ, we begin our own battle against temptation.

I like the way Paul says it in 1 Corinthians 10. And let's end there as we begin this season of Lent, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+Soli Deo Gloria+