



Sermon

Matthew 4:1-11
The First Sunday in Lent
February 10, 2008
Historic St. George's UMC
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The Biggest Temptation

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And he fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished. —Matthew 4:1-2

John Smith was the only Protestant to move into a predominantly Catholic neighborhood. One first Friday in Lent, John was outside grilling a thick juicy steak.

Meanwhile, all his Catholic neighbors were eating cold tuna for supper, their usual fish-on-Friday Lenten drill. This went on the whole season long. Finally the neighbors got together and decided something had to be done about John. Fasting from meat all Lent long was tough enough but the wonderful smells from John's sizzling steaks were getting to them. So, they decided to convert John to Catholicism.

They went over to his house and talked to him. Lo and behold they convinced him. John decided to become a Catholic. The whole neighborhood was delighted. They took John to church. The priest sprinkled him with some water, and said: "John, you were born a Baptist, you were raised a Baptist, and now you are a Catholic."

Everyone was so relieved. Their biggest Lenten temptation was resolved.

Fast forward one year. It's Lent again; the first Friday, supper time. The neighborhood is sitting down to cold tuna fish. All of the sudden the smell of sizzling sirloin comes wafting through their windows. They couldn't believe their noses. *What the ...??*

The scent led them straight to John's house. There he was standing over a big juicy steak. He held a pitcher of water. He was sprinkling it over the steak. With each sprinkle he was saying, "You were born a cow, you were raised a cow and now you are a fish."

I don't know if our Roman Catholic friends do fish-on-Friday like they did when I was growing up, but all of us have heard about or

experienced, in giving something up for Lent, the feast or famine of the season taking us to Easter.

From full to famished – that's also the guts of the gospel story told to us every first Sunday in Lent. From the banks of the Jordan River where Jesus is baptized, blessed and filled with the Spirit to the middle of nowhere where Jesus, starving can hardly remember his own name. All the while the Tempter plays with his mind. From full to famished. From "THIS IS my beloved Son: I am so pleased with him!" to "IF you are the Son of God, command these stones to be loaves of bread." From a bold, confident "YOU ARE!" somebody to a questioning and doubtful "IF you are" anybody.

The distance between the "YOU ARE!" to "IF you are" is the wilderness, the place where you can lose your way. The distance between "THIS IS MY BELOVED CHILD: I am so pleased with him or her!" to "IF you are God's child" is the Tempter's turf.

For years we have read this story as a model for Lenten self denial and discipline. Lent is a time for getting serious and making sacrifices for getting and keeping strong in the face of temptation. Lent is Christian spring training or boot camp. That works, for a while; we can always do more and be faithful in the Christian life. Discipline conditions us. Spiritual, mental, physical calisthenics keep us lean, strong, focused and filled with purpose as God's people.

But when someone is *famished*, like Matthew says of Jesus there in the wilderness, I wonder if that's not another story. Starving makes the temptation story trickier. A starving person wants to get filled. The stones for bread, the "throw yourself off the pinnacle to test God," the "all this can be yours if you'll worship worldly power" – the very spiritual exercises we might glean from

Jesus on the Mount of Temptation, the drills for trusting God completely, function not as spiritual exercises but a kind of personal proving ground.

Now the voice from the tempter sounds very different: *TEST YOURSELF and see if you are worthy. DENY YOURSELF in order to prove that you are strong. PROVE YOURSELF TO ME.* When we are famished, those exercises, those disciplines meant to help can become harmful. They can hurt us. They might destroy us. What are things like anorexia, addictions and depression but some forms self denial gone haywire.

When we are famished like Jesus was, things gets slippery. The ability to ground ourselves wobbles. I wonder whether Jesus experienced anything similar in his wilderness between "YOU ARE a child of God!" to "IF you are a child of God...." I wonder if his temptation had anything to do with the challenging distance between filled and famished. If that is true or at least a possibility, then the story of Jesus temptation is more than a model for self discipline and self denial. Could it be about the temptation to have faith more in what we do, how we perform and prove ourselves than who we are?

Think about Jesus' wilderness experience. Forty days and forty nights of fasting have left him pretty well depleted. He is beyond hunger. He is famished. All he has left is what he knows by heart – some scripture learned from childhood, family religious rituals and the heaven-spoke promises given in his baptism – that he is somebody, that he is God's beloved no matter what (Matthew 3:13-17). All Jesus has is who he is.

Famished, this is the thing we forget most quickly. We forget who we are. The most memorable parental advice I ever received sounded like that. It came the day I headed off to college – getting on an airplane, going further away than I'd ever gone before, beginning life on my own. My father gave me a hug while my mother was all misted up. "Remember who you are," he said for both of them. The wiles of college life, the new sets of choices challenging my life, that could define me or shape my future, the wear and tear of being on my own for the

first time – all these things might deplete me. "Remember who you are," was their benediction.

I have told my own children this as they've headed off college, jobs and getting to be twenty-one (with all that goes with that). Sometimes they roll their eyes. I open my mouth to say the words again and again. They roll their eyes and say the words with me. They know its coming. But they also know deep down they are somebody from somewhere, ones who have been loved, prayed-over, hoped-for and blessed to be not just anybody but somebody with a name, background, a faith and purpose.

When we are depleted by the stuff that life and temptation throws our way the thing we forget most quickly is who we are. The Tempter knows how vulnerable this makes us. It's uncanny how the Tempter's timing is so perfect. *IF you are the Son of God, then turn these stones into bread. IF you are so beloved by God, prove it. Do something. Show me a miracle. Throw yourself down from the pinnacle. Use your special power. IF YOU ARE God's beloved, then do something. I won't believe who you are until you prove it to me.*

How many times across our lives do we hear words like – *IF YOU ARE SO TOUGH, then prove it. How much can you hold? IF YOU ARE THE ALL AMERICAN GIRL, then get the body to match it. IF YOU ARE THE GOOD MOTHER, then you don't have any needs apart from your family. IF YOU ARE A REAL MAN, hide what you feel. IF YOU ARE WHO YOU SAY YOU ARE, prove it. Do you want to be really successful and have no worries? Here's how to live your life.*

The waters of our baptism are so warm and soft. Today Matthew reminds us we don't get to stay in them very long. The way from the Jordan leads straight through the wilderness, and we go round and round until we are famished. We start to wonder: *will we survive? Is God really there? Does God really love me because the way things are going, I'm not so sure? Am I really who I thought I was?*

I think one of the most important messages the gospels give on the First Sunday in Lent is a gut check all right, a warning: the biggest temptation we face is to forget the

Jordan when we are in the wilderness, to forget who and whose we are when the Tempter makes our heads spin. The biggest temptation is to forget what we know by heart when we are famished and the "YOU ARE MY BELOVED" declarative and unconditional promise gets twisted into "IF YOU ARE my beloved, THEN PROVE IT, THEN EARN IT. SHOW YOU DESERVE IT."

This is a sin that haunts us individually and as the Church: to let the Tempter convince us that "beloved" is something that is conditional, not unconditional. To let the Tempter convince us that "beloved" is something we prove rather than who we are.

The agony of it is that then we are stuck in the wilderness. We have to live with the deal we have struck; to trade the promise that we are beloved for the power of deciding who is beloved. It all comes back to this story: the great temptation, when we are famished and empty, and so afraid that we must prove what we already know: *You are my child, my beloved. I am so pleased with you.*

It is no accident that Matthew places the story of temptation immediately after Jesus baptism story. What a different world it would be if we saw the wilderness that lay between being filled and being famished.

And what a different Lent it might be if we made no other promises nor took on any other discipline than to recognize ourselves – ifs, whys, come-what-mays and all – to ground ourselves and others in being God's beloved.

A priest walking on a dark street on a cold night was confronted by a mugger. The mugger demanded the priest's wallet. As the priest opened his coat, the thief noticed the clerical collar and realized he was robbing a man of the cloth. Immediately the mugger apologized and said, "Forget it, Father; keep your money. I had no idea you were a priest." Relieved, the priest reached into his breast pocket, took out a cigarette offering it to the mugger. "No thank you," the thief replied. "I'm giving up smoking for Lent."

The biggest temptation Lent or anytime isn't about what we put off as much as what we put on. You are my child, my beloved. I am so pleased with you. Feast or famine, filled or empty, God give us ears to hear.

Amen.

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