

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, the church season leading up to Jesus' arrest, death, and eventual resurrection. Now just a quick word about church liturgical seasons. The Christian year is divided into seasons with Advent, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, and even something called Ordinary Time. Each season has its own color and Lent is purple – that's why we have the purple cloth over the table, why I'm wearing a purple stole. But I have to just give a shout out to my co-pastor who really went all out this year for Lent with purple hair.

Seriously, Lent is one of my favorite liturgical seasons which, on the surface sounds a little weird because Lent is all about honestly confronting our sin, our mortality, and our limitations as a human. In this season, we're invited to possibly fast or give something up.

And I know... I'm guessing you're wondering why Lent is one of my favorite seasons. It's not that so much that I enjoy remembering that I'm going to die or focusing on the places where I mess up. And I certainly don't like giving up things I like – for instance, this year I'm choosing to give up sweets (with one exception I'm allowing myself which is to eat some of Julian's birthday cake as she turned 7 on Thursday).

No, the reason I love Lent is because it's a chance for us to be very honest about what it means to be human, and we can do that precisely because we are so confident in God's love for us -- not in some idealized version of who we'd like to be but rather exactly as we are. In fact, maybe the most radical part of the Christian faith is that God cared about humanity so much that God became one. In Lent, we remember that Jesus was very human. He could get frustrated just like we do. He experienced grief and loss. He dealt with corrupt political leaders. He was exasperated when his friends acted a bit ridiculous. He suffered. He was betrayed. He died. And, in our Scripture today, he was tempted.

This story takes place right after Jesus was baptized and before he began his public ministry. He had taken a pilgrimage of sorts into the wilderness where he fasted for forty days. Now, there's two things to know about this. First, the wilderness in Scripture always indicates an in-between time. Something old has passed away and the new thing is about to be born. The most obvious example is that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 years after escaping slavery in Egypt before coming into their own land. And the second thing is that number – 40. Jesus fasted for 40 days. The Israelites wandered for 40 years. The Biblical writers were master story tellers and these numbers are not meant to be taken literally. Rather, they knew that a baby is in the womb for 40 weeks.

Whenever we see 40 in the Bible, it means God is about to do something new, about to birth something into the world. The wilderness, then, is like the womb. It's where that new thing, that new venture is nurtured and developed.

And, in the case of Jesus, the way we know he is ready to birth the realm of God into the world is if he can withstand the temptations of the devil. The devil tempts Jesus in three ways.

First, he's tempted to use his power to turn the stones to bread. After fasting, Jesus was certainly hungry, but simply satisfying his hunger wasn't the real temptation. You see, Jesus lived in an agrarian society and whoever controlled the food supply, controlled the economy. If Jesus suddenly started making bread appear, he would have had tremendous power. It was the same power Pharaoh had in the Old Testament where he took all the crops for himself and forced the people to become his slaves in order to eat.

The second temptation is explicitly about power. Worship me, the devil says, and I'll put you over all the kingdoms of the world. He was offering to make Jesus a king, a political ruler. Throughout Jesus' life, there would be others who would try to get him, including some of his followers, to lead a revolution to overthrow the Roman empire and become king.

And lastly, the devil tries to get Jesus to perform a wonder from the temple, even quoting Scripture to him. If Jesus could jump off the top of the temple and land unhurt, surely the people would make him their high priest.

The temptation of Christ is really all about tempting him with power – economic power, political power, and religious power.

And to each one, Jesus says, "No." And I think it's worth asking, "Why?" What's so bad about getting a little power. Couldn't Jesus do so much good if he had wealth or if he ruled the world or if he were in charge of the temple? I could easily justify saying yes to the devil's temptations.

One of the things that's striking to me about this story is that the devil's not really tempting Jesus to do "bad" things, at least it doesn't appear that way. He's not trying to get Jesus to do the things we normally think of as wrong.

There's many images in art and literature about the temptation of Christ, but my favorite is from a wonderful little booklet called, "Manna and Mercy" where the devil is depicted as a motivational speaker.

[Read Manna and Mercy]

I have to say that Plan A makes a lot of sense to me.

But the moment Jesus chose that path, he would be forgetting who he was and what he came to do. You see, the very idea of God becoming human is about God, the source of all power, willingly choosing to give up power to connect with us. The apostle Paul describes this work of relinquishing power like this:

Let the same mind be in you that was<sup>in</sup> in Christ Jesus,

<sup>6</sup> who, though he existed in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be grasped,

<sup>7</sup> but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
assuming human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a human,

<sup>8</sup> he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.

Now, I don't mean to suggest that power is always bad. Who our leaders are – whether we're talking business, or political, or religious -- matter a lot, and people in positions of power have the capacity to do great good or great harm. But the story of our gospel is that Jesus came to save us not through power but through love.

Through love no matter what.

Love for outcasts.

Love for sinners.

Love for enemies.

Love even for the people who would hurt him, who would beat him, who would kill him.

Love for every single one of us.

You see, friends, the reason we can honestly confront the rawness of our humanity during Lent is because we are so confident in God's love for us. Jesus' own journey that we remember in this season tells us that there is absolutely nothing, nothing that we can do, nothing that any human can do to make God stop loving us. We are God's children, loved just as we are.

That is the great truth of our faith. And that truth is what the temptations we encounter throughout life try to make us forget. Many images come to mind when we think of temptation. We often think of things like lust, greed, gluttony, and so on. However, today I want to invite us to think of temptation not so much as the desire to do specific acts that we know we shouldn't do but rather temptation is about trying to make us forget who we are. All temptation tries to convince us that we have to be something more or that we need something more to be worthy, to be loved. Temptation tries to convince us that we should have more

prestige, more wealth, more power, a more perfect family, more perfectly curated Instagram pages.

My hope for us is that we can walk in the way of Jesus and trust that who God has made each of us to be is enough. And if we are secure in who we are and in who God has called us to be, then we too can live out of the reality of love – love for God, love for others, love for ourselves – just like Jesus did.

That's actually what Lent is really all about – to be honest about who we are, to try to be the very best version of ourselves, and to love ourselves for who we are...because God already does. Amen.