

March 6, 2022 - 1st Sunday of Lent - A Reflection

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2,9-16; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

For every job there are a specific set of skills and attitudes that will make the work more effective. We have seen national leaders who are very effective in their roles and we have seen national leaders who seem to flounder or cause more problems than they solve. We have experienced effective and ineffective teachers during our years. There have been small business owners who have succeeded and those who have failed because of the particular skills and attitudes they brought to the job. I could go on and on with other examples but I believe I have made my point. Because of this reality many industries these days perform a kind of aptitude test on prospective employees as a kind of trial to see if the person is ready for the challenge. This is not so unusual - even the Messiah of God went through this kind of test as he prepared to begin his ministry in the world.

The story of the temptation of Jesus is one with which we are pretty familiar. Each year on the first Sunday of Lent we hear a version of the story from Matthew, Mark, or Luke. Each author has a slightly different focus but they all agree with some very important details. While the word 'temptation' is often used it would seem that the word 'trial' is a better description in the sense that prior to the beginning of his public ministry Jesus' strength and commitment were put to the test. Among all the various lessons that come with this story is the answer to the question: "what sort of approach will Jesus use in the fulfilment of his ministry as the anointed of God?" This trial which Jesus endured demonstrates to me that the choice of how to accomplish the work of God is an important one because the means is just as vital as the target at the end when it comes to God's work. Unlike the adage "the end justifies the means" Jesus demonstrated that the "means are as important as the end". This story of the temptation follows on the heels of Jesus' baptism. In Luke's version of the baptism the event ended with the heavens being opened, the Holy Spirit descending in bodily form like a dove, and the voice of God being heard saying, "You are my Son, my beloved, in you I am well pleased". This well pleased God then sent Jesus to spend 40 days in the wilderness without food. The only conclusion I can make as I think about Jesus' journey in the wilderness is that this trip into seclusion was commanded as an act of love on the part of God even though we may have a difficult time recognizing it as such. Somehow the time of depravation was for the good of Jesus and his ministry in a similar way that athletes are sent through trials in order to prepare them for the challenges they will face in the future. And so we are shown that in God's eyes the way something is accomplished is as important as accomplishing something. This truth is also seen in other endeavours. Any carpenter can tell you that just because a job looks good when it is done does not mean it is a good job. If your structure collapses after a strong wind it doesn't do you much good. What Jesus was

called upon to do required that it be done in a particular way.

So, even though he probably had the ability to turn stones into bread he fasted because God had not told him it was time for him to eat. Jesus did not worry about starvation because he trusted in his Father's care. The Devil, on the other hand, urged him to disobey the instruction to go without food - Jesus refused to follow the Devil's suggestion. Those who choose to give up some kind of food as a Lenten devotion are, in a small way, choosing to follow in Jesus' footsteps. We have been given the ability to feed ourselves but sometimes God asks us to suspend that ability in order to hear from God and demonstrate our devotion to God's ways. It is a discipline that is meant to strengthen our ability to be disciples of Jesus. Doing the work of God properly requires a level of devotion and obedience that takes time to master and the season of Lent is one of those times we are asked to strengthen those particular muscles.

It was also in Jesus' destiny to be King of kings and Lord of lords but that was to happen in a certain way which involved the sacrifice of his life on a cross. The Devil, on the other hand, urged him to take a 'short cut' to that position of authority by pledging allegiance to God's enemy. Short cuts are not often helpful and putting our lives in the hands of anyone but God is not a good idea. Over my years of ministry I have sadly witnessed many people who have tried to implement 'short cuts' in order to gain something they believed was their destiny. Instead of trusting in God's provision for them they lie or cheat in order to get a promotion or turn their lives over to a drug dealer who provides them with a substance that seems to give them an edge. Jesus refused the suggestion to follow someone other than God and made the statement that God was always going to be at the center of his life.

Finally, there was the temptation to do something spectacular in order to advance the cause. Jumping off a high building with the expectation that God would send his angels to catch you would have been a way to gather a crowd but it would not have produced disciples who were going to become dedicated followers. Jesus refused this suggestion and committed himself to simply following God's direction as he lived out his ministry. Once again I have seen Christian leaders and congregations make the attempt of grabbing the attention of people in some way that is meant to show the power of God. I have never seen these attempts produce any lasting effects. Instead it produces a group of people who are always looking for the next spectacular event. They gather as a congregation not to hear what God has to say to them but to be dazzled by something. Being involved in Jesus' ministry does have its spectacular moments but they are not to be the target - they are to be the result of faithfulness. Jesus rejected this suggestion from the Devil as well - the Messiah was not to be a 'circus performer'.

The temptation, or trial, of Jesus teaches us a good many things as we contemplate our own ministries. As the anointed one of God Jesus had access to some pretty impressive abilities and his destiny as ruler was established by God. It is clear that the means through which Jesus would minister to the world to which he came were important to the process of being the anointed one. The crowds wanted to make him king after he fed them with a miraculous feeding but he refused. He could have stayed in Capernaum healing thousands but he traveled to other towns in order to share the message of God's kingdom coming near. Jesus could have marshaled a heavenly army when he stood before Pilate but he went humbly to the cross and died. He asks his disciples to follow in his footsteps. "Do not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the Father." "Worship the Lord God and serve only him". "Do not put the Lord your God to the test".

As disciples of Jesus we are provided with the opportunity to bring a ministry into the world. You might say we have been anointed - set apart - for a particular calling which involves certain skills and attitudes. St. Paul, in a number of places, urges his readers to consider their place in the Body of Christ and exercise their particular gifts. Like Jesus those gifts will need to be exercised in accordance with the ways in which God wishes those gifts to be used. We probably do not have the power to turn stones into bread but we do have other abilities that might have to be controlled. "Just because you can do something doesn't mean you should". We may see a 'short cut' to the place we believe we belong but if that means placing our lives under the control of God's enemy we need to refuse. We may wish to do something spectacular with our gifts and abilities so that a crowd will see how wonderful we are but that may be putting the Lord our God to the test. Following these commands will require a level of discipline that can, and should, be strengthened through the season of Lent. I pray that we may experience growth in grace and in our knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ as we walk this path toward the celebration of the Resurrection.

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