

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Lent 1-A (1 March 2020)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

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Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7, Romans 5:12-19, Matthew 4:1-11, Psalm 32

1 Beginning: Once upon a time...

Jesus is in the desert, fasting. For 40 days: that's a long time.

Have you every spent 40 days in the desert, fasting? Have you ever been that hungry, that empty?

I believe a lot of you have. Maybe not with sand in your shoes and the sun burning down. Maybe not for an entire 40 uninterrupted days, God willing. But pretty much all of us have visited that place.

The desert is the place where everything changes. Where all of the plans and priorities you woke up with that morning just kind of fade away. The place where some event or circumstance just takes everything that makes a day "normal" or "stable" or "bearable" and throws it out the window. We might encounter the desert when someone we love dies. Or when a doctor pronounces the word "cancer." Or a health insurance company says, "denied." A desert can be the place you encounter when you lose a job. Or a marriage falls apart.

There's a lot of near-hysteria in the news right now about the Covid-19 virus. There's fear of the deserts it will bring. It's like a slow-motion action sequence, as we await its inevitable spread into our own community and the deaths it will bring about. There's irony in the breathless coverage of the news, because here in the United States is absolutely the best place to be to encounter this virus. Our health systems and our general wealth will insulate us from the worst effects of the virus in a way that the citizens of most countries could only dream of. But it's an equal opportunity virus. And it still threatens us in a way that reminds me very much of Jesus' struggle in the desert.

2 Middle: Tension: destabilizing

It was in the desert that Jesus, like us, faced three fundamental temptations.

2.1 Rocks into bread

The first temptation was this: “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”

40 days he had been out there, fasting in the desert. Do you think Jesus was hungry? That’s a whole level of hunger way beyond what most of us have ever experienced.

The temptation is not in the eating of bread. There’s nothing wrong with that. The temptation to Jesus was to try to take control of the situation, to be self-sufficient and to look out for number one. Because the whole point of choosing to go out to the desert was to learn to depend on God, to acknowledge and live into that dependence.

Independence and self-reliance are great cultural values for us today. I think this is often because if I don’t have to depend on you, then I can pretend that I don’t need to pay attention to the ways in which you depend on me. Wealthy Christians have a reputation for being stingy and unkind to others precisely because our wealth insulates us from feeling beholden to others, and our independence becomes a kind of self-righteous moral value.

A viral epidemic is scary precisely because it threatens my independence. Viruses don’t care about money. They’re a little put off by hand-washing: 20 seconds with soap and warm water, but no amount of cash or political power is going to keep the virus away.

Jesus came to the desert not in order to eat or to demonstrate his rugged individualism. He came in order to encounter God. He emptied himself of self-sufficiency and acknowledged his hungry dependence upon God.

2.2 Throw yourself down

The second temptation is really the opposite extreme of the first. The devil says, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down!” Whereas the previous temptation is for Jesus to assert his own sovereignty, his independence from God, this temptation is to call out God and to demand a response according to how Jesus thinks things should be. It is, in fact, to demonstrate one’s power *over* God and to place on God responsibility for our own foolishness.

It is right and good to pray that God lessen the effects of the latest Corona virus, or even make them go away. It also right and good for us to do the basic things we’re advised to do to avoid illness. And whatever happens, it will be right and good to pray for one another and to take appropriate precautions to care for one another.

Jesus came into the desert not in order to do whatever foolish thing he wants, but to embrace and participate in what God is doing instead.

2.3 Worship me

This last temptation seems the most overt. “Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’” Jesus is offered power – for a price.

How many times have we talked about someone “making a deal with the devil?” When do we make compromises with what we believe is right for the sake of getting something done? When do we turn a blind eye to something wrong for the sake of expediency?

The internment of U.S. citizens of Japanese descent during World War II would be an example of this practice. Every time we turn a blind eye to some abhorrent practice for the sake of profit or convenience, we worship at the altar of power, and subject ourselves to a harsh master.

But Jesus came into the desert not to find power or privilege. Success wasn’t what he sought. Jesus came looking for relationship with God – and he refused to settle for anything less.

3 End: Now / not yet; Because God... therefore...

Deserts can be useful. They are times when our faith has opportunity to blossom. When we have opportunity to learn what faith is really good for. We put away the things that fill our eyes and ears and hearts on any given day, things like television and cell phones and long lists of things to do. And we create space to hear the voice of God instead. Deserts are good for that.

Covid-19 may well end up among us. We’ll have to see what happens and how our doctors and government health officials guide us to deal with it. But even if things get difficult, I invite you to recognize that this is nothing new, nothing exceptional. This is just one more desert to pass through, one more Lenten discipline, one more invitation to set aside every day distractions and to pay attention to the activity of God in your life.

Lent is an invitation to follow Jesus into the desert, whichever desert happens to present itself to you. It is an invitation to create space, to set aside time in your life simply to be in God’s presence. It is a time to embrace the relationship that God offers to you and, in so doing, to live into the eternal kind of life that you seek.

Amen.