

Lent: A Time to Let Go of Doubt

Sermon by Pastor Patricia Geiseman

Lent 1

March 9, 2019

Luke 4:1-13

Even in our day and age, people out there in the world still know about Lent. Ash Wednesday makes the Chicago news every year. There are photos of the faithful getting ashes smudged on their foreheads in the newspaper. “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.” People still give up things for Lent, like alcohol, chocolate, social networking and chips, fast food and meat.

Chipotle has expanded their meatless Lifestyle Bowls with more “plant powered” options. Chick-Fil-A has a Fish-Fil-A during this season.

I admit that I wonder about the benefit in this kind of “giving up.”

And even though the stores are full of Easter candy, bunnies, and chicks, Easter is still weeks away.

Lent is a time we join with people from many places and traditions to make room again for our own reflection: Whose are we? What are we part of? Who do we trust?

Our weekend worship and our personal devotional time invite us to join Jesus in the wilderness, to consider again our need for identity, awareness, and assurance.

The story of Jesus’ Temptation is recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It is really old material that the Gospel writers have edited to fit their themes. This year we read from Luke.

Immediately after his baptism, Jesus is led out into the wilderness. Luke tells us that Jesus is “full of the Holy Spirit” (Luke 4:1), but after forty days without eating, Jesus is famished. He is hungry, empty, and vulnerable.

The devil comes upon the scene, personified here as the evil force pulling Jesus from his empowered position as BELOVED to a place of doubt.

The three temptations that follow are not like the temptations that may come to our minds: more chocolate cake, more Internet, a white lie ... a nasty comment ... another glass of wine ... or one more Amazon purchase ...

The three scenes in our story are diabolical distractions to make room for DOUBT.

Temptation #1: Turn stone into bread. So, what's wrong with this? Why not give the people what they need and long for? It's not a bad thing, bread for the hungry. But the words—*"If you are the Son of God..."* (Luke 4:3)—are an invitation to Jesus to doubt his sonship, to doubt his identity.

There are times we all doubt who we are.

We get lonely and afraid in the wildernesses of our own lives. There are times when it's easy to wonder if we really are part of a larger LIFE, a greater agenda.

This happens throughout life, especially whenever we move into a new phase, a new chapter, a new place. When we are very young, we have to leave the safety of home and venture into new systems of school and friendship. The love of our parents—even when strong and trustworthy—feels like not enough. We long for acceptance.

And, later, we move further out into the world, seek out adventures, grow up some more, and find work to do and people to share life with. We may have children of our own. Our roles change. We may wonder who we are in the blurry time of tending babies and raising children. In the busy time of career building. And ladder climbing. We compare and compete. We wonder why we feel famished.

And then these chapters end and new ones begin. Like now, in our life together at St. Mark's as I move into retirement. Our work life ends and makes space for new interests and people. In time, we care for those who cared for us. We look back and we look ahead. We hope our decisions are good ones. Some of our dreams have been realized and others have all but dissolved into the daylight. Transitions are part of life, endings and beginnings. Are they ever easy? Are we ever really ready? I wonder who I will be without you.

There are times we long to feel BELOVED. But we can be too busy, too worried, and too oblivious to realize our own need.

Lent invites us to trust our identity as always BELOVED.

Jesus refused to turn the stones into bread. But we know in his ministry that will follow, he will feed the hungry. Jesus is the Bread of Life. And, still, we work to feed the hungry.

Temptation #2: In this scene the devil leads Jesus up on a high place and offers him the kingdoms of the world. He offers Jesus glory and authority, on one condition: *"If you, then, will worship me"* (Luke 4:7).

Here, Jesus is tempted to doubt again, this time to doubt in the presence of the kingdom of God. Is God here? We still want to know. In the wilderness of our lives we are overwhelmed by apparent kingdoms of business, money, and media. We worship their influence. We give them more.

In the wilderness of our world, there are times we doubt God's presence. How can we not? We are overwhelmed by a sense of evil and mayhem. I watched on the news the long, sad procession of the hearse carrying the body of a murdered McHenry police officer. Tornado winds have flattened an entire community in Alabama. Venezuela is in the dark, without power. And we have our own doubts about captivities closer to home. Closer to our hearts.

There are seasons we can feel without hope, lost in jobs, restless in relationships. Past hurts haunt us. Addictions hold us hostage. Sometimes our hearts have grown hard and cold and small. We may not even know it. And we may not even care.

It can be difficult in the evil of the world and the heartache in our own lives to trust that holy, healing power is present. Or possible.

We need the presence of softening compassion, the warmth of reassurance, the wideness of grace. We need a new truth.

Even though Jesus refused to bow down to the invitation to political power high on the magical mountain, he taught and lived out the truth of God's inclusive justice. And so can we.

Temptation #3: Lastly, the devil leads Jesus to Jerusalem, to the top of the temple. The devil taunts him: *"If you are the Son of God throw yourself down from here"* (Luke 4:9). You trust that God will send angels to catch you, don't you?

This scene invites Jesus to doubt that God cares.

The only way some can believe in God, or a power greater than themselves, is by signs and wonders. But Jesus refuses to entertain people with miraculous demonstrations in order to make them believe. Really, if we believe only because of a miracle or sign, we do not really believe.

Miracles and signs do not create faith. Quick awe and wonder at something miraculous is not faith. It will fall by the way side. It takes faith to see a miracle. [1]

Believing because of a miracle is like loving someone only if you get your way.

So, Jesus doesn't jump off the top of the temple to see if God will send angels to catch him. But he does go to the cross with courage that God's will for life is greater than human will for power. Jesus trusts that Love Wins. [2]

The Spirit led Jesus into a lonely place where he was tested by a force that urged him to doubt his identity as God's own, to doubt God's presence in the world, and to doubt God cares enough to do something.

The rituals of our liturgy remind us of our spiritual identity. Even in our postmodern, post-Christendom culture, the ritual of baptism is still important to many. In the liturgy we hear ancient words: We are claimed as God's own. BELOVED! We renounce the forces that pull us away from this identity, from trusting that we are loved. Like Jesus, in baptism we are anointed with identity and with the gifts to live it out. Like Jesus, our lives can shine with light.

This past Tuesday evening, I was able to be part of the mayor's State of the City Address at Aurora University. It was heavy ... and uplifting. He spoke of the Pratt tragedy and the courage, commitment, and competence of the police and fire departments. The evening ended with a joyful musical tribute to the strength of the city; the whole audience stood and clapped to "Shine the Light."

Here at St. Mark's, we are surrounded by a community that promises to be present. To accompany and nurture. To support and guide. To be the light. We are here to help raise the young ones up to trust in their identity as God's own. Together, we're part of a greater mission.

In the early church, persons prepared for baptism during Lent. Three pillars that hold us still—prayer, fasting, and almsgiving—held the season. Making time for more intentional prayer may require that we let go of something else. We will only have twenty-four hours a day, no matter what. And fasting? A plant-based protein bowl at Chipotle may taste good.

Pope Francis has another idea: Give up indifference. He wrote that if, in giving up something for Lent, you do no good for others, you do nothing great. Even more than giving up candy and alcohol, we can fast from indifference. If you want to change your body, forgoing candy or pop is the way to go. If you want to change your heart, a harder fast is needed. [3] We can let go of doubt in each other and ourselves. We can look for goodness, kindness, honesty, and integrity.

What we look for, we will find!

Lent is a time to renew our confidence in who we are, to return to the promises of God that include us.

Throughout the wildernesses of our time, as daughters and sons of the Creator, sisters and brothers with each other, we can trust each other with our real feelings, fears, and needs. We can speak up! And ... we can ask each other, "How are you doing?" And mean it. And really listen! Listening to each other is one of the best gifts we can offer.

Lent invites us to trust our identity as always BELOVED.

Lent is a time to make room for LOVE that makes us whole and sets us free.

Amen.

Resources

[1] Rohr, Richard. *The Good News According to Luke*, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002.

[2] Ringe, Sharon, "Exegetical Perspective on Luke 4:1-13," *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, p. 49.

[3] Hale, Christopher J. "Pope Francis' Guide to Lent: What You Should Give Up This Year,"
<http://ocarm.org/en/content/ocarm/pope-francis-guide-lent-what-you-should-give-year>
<http://time.com/3714056/pope-francis-lent-2015-fasting/>

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Reflection Questions

REFLECTION 1

- When do you doubt yourself? Your identity and abilities your goodness and worth?
- What or who helps you regain confidence in your loveable-ness?
- How do you build the resilience we all need?

REFLECTION 2

Sometimes we doubt the presence of God in our world and in our lives. Violence, cover ups in high places, turmoil and so much "bad news" shakes our trust that the Creator cares.

- How can we work to reconnect and build trust in the presence and strength of God that works in and through us?

REFLECTION 3

Sometimes we wonder who cares about us. About the problems of the world.

- Is there a time when you could talk with a trusted person about something that bothers you?
- Is there someone you could ask this week about how he or she is REALLY doing? And REALLY listen?