

A LENTEN DEVOTIONAL 2014



Lent I Holy Gospel Matthew 4:1-11

Jesus experiences anew the temptations that Israel faced in the wilderness. As the Son of God, he endures the testing of the evil one. Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

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 said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Mon: He fasted forty days and forty nights.

Giving up something for Lent is not something many Lutherans were brought up with. It's an unfortunate by-product of the Reformation. In medieval times fasting was a regular part of religious devotion. The Reformation was critical of how fasting was understood and taught, both because it was made a sin not to fast at required times, and it was also regarded as meritorious in the eyes of God. Luther counseled that if fasting was undertaken with either of these ideas in mind, one was better off not fasting at all.

That did not mean fasting was bad in itself. But it needed to be understood that the proper purpose of fasting is very simple: it is an exercise in self-control. The point of fasting is not to impress God or others, but for our own benefit. As in the temptations set before Jesus, the devil wants us to leap before we look. Temptations find their hook in appealing to our primitive desire for immediate gratification so that we act before weighing the consequences.

Fasting is about practicing resistance to our natural inclination to immediate gratification. We choose something in our life and put some kind of restriction or limit on it, as a reminder that we should not be ruled by things or behaviors, but that they should be ruled by us.

For Jesus the fast was about being led by the Spirit and ruled by the Word of God. And so we take him as our example in fasting. *"Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much."* [Luke 16:10]

No one has to give up anything for Lent. But being a disciple of Jesus may mean giving up many things in life. A little bit of practice might be a good thing.

Tue: Command these stones to become loaves of bread.

Wouldn't that be a great power to have? Clearly it has its appeal. We remember the title characters from "I Dream of Jeannie" or "Bewitched," how they could conjure anything up with a blink and a nod or a twitch of the nose. Yet these TV shows recognized something was fundamentally wrong with this kind of power. Its use was often discouraged by the mortals in their lives. These mortals knew that to make bread from stones was to cheat. In Genesis the disobedient Adam was told "by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread." It was to be an enduring reminder that the first couple had turned away from all that was freely provided to them and instead grasped for what was forbidden.

The nature of this first temptation is to undermine faith in God. As with Eve, the devil urges Jesus to fend for himself and abandon the promise of God's sustaining care. Whether it comes to us as an atheistic challenge-- *There is no God to help you;* or a challenge the God is malevolent and uncaring--*God will not help you--* the effect is the same: The insidious seed of doubt--*You are on your own.*

But the punishment pronounced Genesis, does not mean that God turns his back on the creatures made in his image. The Hebrew blessing over bread at meals blesses God for providing bread from the earth; Jesus teaches his followers to pray to God for daily bread. Yes, getting daily bread will mean planting and weeding, harvesting, threshing, and grinding, kneading and baking. But all the strength and energy to do these things ultimately comes

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from God sustaining power.

The Bible shows us that even when God is displeased, even when God punishes, God cares and preserves. Again and again, in difficulty after difficulty the people of God are urged to pray, to keep faith with God, because he will hear the prayer of the faithful. His word is food indeed!

Wed: One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

Jesus' response to the devil's tempting is not merely about hunger, it is about being sustained by the Word which is the source of life. The Word through whom all things came into being. This is the life-giving, life-bearing Word. Indeed it is Jesus himself, though perhaps he has only begun to know or understand this about himself. But it was the Word that captivated him when he conversed with the teachers at the temple. Even then it was his steady diet!

The bread from the earth sustains the body for a day or two at a time; the bread from heaven, the Word come down, gives enduring life. In John 6 Jesus says: *"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."*

This rejoinder to the temptation makes a clear connection to the opening chapter of Genesis where God creates the heavens and the earth in six days by speaking, thus we live *"by every word that comes from the mouth of God."* When we pray for God to give us daily bread, we mean more than "Wonder." Luther puts it this way: *"What is meant by daily bread? Answer: Everything required to satisfy our bodily needs, such as food and clothing, house and home, fields and flocks, money and property; a pious spouse and good children, trustworthy servants, godly and faithful rulers, good government; seasonable weather, peace and health, order and honor; true friends, faithful neighbors, and the like."* [Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*, Part 3]

Could we survive on a desert island alone as long as we had food and water. Perhaps we would be sustained for a time...even years, but who among us would call that living, without society, without companionship, without love. Without the breadth of all of these things Luther mentions, our lives could not be fruitful or joyous, or even interesting. Bread alone cannot give life. We live, we flourish, when all the power of God's word is at work in the world and in us.

Thu: Do not put the Lord your God to the test.

It is not as if the Lord our God is unwilling or unable to provide for his people signs of his steadfast love. There are in fact many such signs throughout scripture, not least of which is the Word of God previously mentioned. This Word is given that our faith and trust may have foundation and root. This Word sets before us not one sign but brings to remembrance a multitude of instances showing God's faithfulness to his people.

To require of God to give new signs, or to act in dangerous or foolishly ways to "prove" God cares is fundamentally to set the entire record of holy history at naught, to say in essence: It is not good enough; I need a personal experience or commitment from God. But such a "proof" is meaningless unless and until God is trusted. And if those which have been given to us through the Scriptures are not sufficient, how long would it be before we would begin to doubt whatever new test the Lord had met?

What test or signs that we could devise would be better than those which God has already given? Luther writes *"But the God who has revealed Himself by visible marks, who has given the Word of promise and has instituted the sacraments, is the true God and Savior whom we are able to take hold of and to understand."* [Lectures on Genesis 15-20, LW Vol. 3 p. 122]

Shall we throw ourselves off roofs daily to assure ourselves of God's steadfast love; is it not enough that through the promise of baptism we daily die and are raised to new life?

Foolish tests or asking of signs are the farthest thing possible from the "righteousness of faith." The Word of God tells us—*Baptism, the Keys¹ and the Supper* tell us that we are true sons and daughters of God. If these signs do not provide us with the confidence of faith, neither will jumping from spires, or handling snakes, or drinking of poisons. And while such tests might validate the promise of the preservation of our bodies; they do not nurture faith.

Fri: All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.

The story of the temptations put before Jesus is not about some heroic ordeal to demonstrate his worthiness before God and humanity. It is part of the fullness of his incarnation. In these temptations we see the spiritual

¹ The Office of the Keys, absolution or the declaration of forgiveness.

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dilemmas we face, each in their own way seeking to displace God as our Lord. We learn in them how scripture can be twisted and perverted away from God's intentions.

As in the other temptations presented to Jesus, the final temptation recorded by Matthew is the one which is the most pointed. The previous temptations were filled with insinuations designed to undermine Jesus' confidence in his relationship with the Father. They have been prefaced with "*If you are the Son of God...*" They challenge Jesus' identity.

Now in his boldest (and most deceptive) move, the devil assumes the power and prerogatives of God. Here he claims that he can give to all the kingdom's of the world and their splendor, if Jesus would reject God and turn to him in worship—essentially to make the devil his god.

It is true that the world and its kingdoms are often said to be under the devil's power. But it is not his rightful power. It is a usurped power. In truth, the world is held under the spell of the deceiver. These kingdoms are not the devil's to give away, nor are they things to be coveted. It is in this last scene that the story of Faust has its origins. The devil is asking Jesus to sell his soul. But Jesus will have none of it. It is from this very dialogue that our baptismal renunciations take their form: Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God? Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God? Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God?

This first week of Lent reminds of these renunciations and calls us to the renewal of baptism that occurs every day, but which is part of our resurrection with Christ in the vigil service, the first service of Easter.

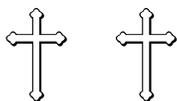
Sat: *Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.*

This response from Jesus to the devil's allurements is the ultimate profession of faith. It is a fundamental restatement of the First Commandment, which says "You shall have no other gods." Of course, we have to understand what it means to "have a god." Is it something which is an opinion or conviction held in our minds? Is it a belief in a truth? Few opinions rise to the level truths. They are value judgments not statements of absolutes. What may be a true opinion for one person may not be for another.

The First Commandment makes an altogether different and ultimate claim. If God is God, all other claimants are false pretenders and liars. There can be no compromising of this. One cannot be "sorta" God. If God is God, then there is only one to whom we owe our ultimate allegiance and devotion, only one who we can rightly worship, and in the end only one whom we serve.

This is not to say we cannot and should not have relationships of respect or service toward other persons, only that they we understand those actions and relationships as governed or ordered by God. We see our neighbors as God's gifts to us; we act toward our neighbors as God's gift to them. When we allow other persons or things (including ourselves) to take the place of God, things fall apart. God does not need our worship or service, because God, by definition, is self-sufficient. But God knows that we are not self-sufficient beings that we need help and assistance from our neighbors to have a full and rich life. But if we misplace our worship and loyalty and direct them to some other greedier, less gracious god, our neighbors will soon be neglected and we will be caught up in an endless battle of false gods clamoring for attention. But when the true God is worshiped and served. Then all receive the respect they are due and all are served in God's name.

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Lent 2 Holy Gospel John 3:1-17

A curious Pharisee visits Jesus by night to learn from the teacher his friends reject. Jesus speaks to him about life in the Spirit and the kingdom of God.

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Mon: No one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.

John telescopes so much of the Gospel story of Jesus. Nicodemus speaks of Jesus signs, but this is but the third chapter of John, and there have been only two; one semi-private and one very public, one a miracle of joy and one a prophetic visitation of wrath. We cannot what if any other signs had been done by Jesus and became known by Nicodemus, we might conclude that he is thinking primarily of the uproar in the temple. As the first reading in Lent taken from John, we might well associate it with the reading of the first week. In the wilderness narrative there was special emphasis on Jesus' zeal for the Word of God. In the cleansing story, Jesus manifests a similar zeal, for the House of the Prayer, a place of grace where all may seek the assistance and blessing of the Lord. As the center of the religious life of the Jewish people, the stakes are high, and particularly for Jesus as he drives out the money changers.

Whether Jesus went there with this intention, or was driven by the Spirit in the moment, his passionate action sets him apart from the average Jews. Is it this which has impressed Nicodemus so much? Clearly Jesus had exhibited a level of authority beyond that of the ordinary person. John records the disciples recalling the text "Zeal for you house will consume me." Nicodemus may well have made a similar association.

It is with this in mind, that this conventional and cautious man seeks Jesus out under the cover of the night. He is not yet a disciple of Jesus, but as an elder of the people, he is captivated by the sense that the presence of God is with Jesus. He is not yet ready to make a declaration of Jesus messiahship like Simeon or John the Baptizer, but the spark of faith has been ignited, and Nicodemus is drawn to the light. In his heart he is perhaps wondering the same question we will hear voiced by the woman next week: "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" This is why he has come to learn more from him. It is why we come to him as well.

Tue: No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.

In modern times there is probably no more widely known expression than "born again." In the generation in which I was raised it was the most common identifier of religious fervor, a watch word of what was called then the "Jesus movement". It made the news, especially when Jimmy Carter used it to describe himself in interviews as he ran for the presidency.

In those days though, and to some extent still, it represented a particular expression of what is now more commonly known as American Evangelicalism. Often its was used as a qualifier to distinguish one believer from

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another. For many it was important to self-identify (or label others) as “born again Christians” as opposed to Lutherans, Episcopalians, Methodists, or (shudder) Roman Catholics. Ideally it is an expression which belongs to all Christians, finding its genesis in this passage of John and in the epistles of Paul. In the end, for all Christians it is about having the eyes and ears of faith opened by the Spirit to the message and person of Jesus as Lord.

The nuances between the usage of “born again” among Christians often centers on how this is understood to be manifested, whether it is something given to us completely as a gift (given in baptism) which then we grow into, or whether it is the blossoming of that gift seen in a declaration of faith in Jesus as Lord (and in believer’s baptism).

Our present text cannot resolve these different emphases. What Jesus states here is that however this new birth comes about, it is not our doing. It is God at work in us through the Spirit. This theme is of great importance to John the Evangelist, who declared in the very beginning of his Gospel: “...to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.” [John 1:12-13] The NRSV preferred reading of “born from above” rather than “born anew” or “born again” is chosen to reflect this foundational statement about the ministry of Jesus. The power of this message comes from him, not only in its weight and presence reflected in the zeal discussed previously, but as that which is brought by him and given through him, even as he is the one who is come down from heaven to dwell among us and draws us to the Father. This theme is present throughout John’s Gospel.

Wed: *What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.*

In the Epiphany season this year we have heard Paul speak of the contrast between the perspectives of the world and that of God. One is wisdom and one is foolishness, and a person’s faith (who their god/God is) will declare which is which. Jesus is essentially stating this same principle with Nicodemus.

The story of the Fall is told to illustrate the effect of sin. In creation, the male and female were made in the image of God. Not only did they share God’s likeness, they shared God’s will, living by every word that came from God’s mouth. That is until the day when they listened to the word of another. On that day, their flesh and spirit were torn asunder, going their separate ways. As their heirs in the flesh, we share the same inclination to choose our own will over God’s will, the way of the flesh over the way of the Spirit.

God promise through the prophets that he would send the Spirit into our hearts and create them anew, writing his will on our hearts, bringing us to new life in the Spirit. In his Baptism, and in the Transfiguration Jesus is shown forth as the new man who is filled with the Spirit, and who breathes new life into us, restoring in us the full image of God, in flesh and spirit, making us children of God and heirs with him and bestowing on us a place in God’s house forever.

Thu: *Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.*

The image of the serpent is taken from the story of Israel before they had come into the land and at a time when they lost faith in God’s promises. On that occasion poisonous serpents afflicted the people. These are described as a punishment and are perhaps intended as a reminder of serpent of old infected Adam and Eve with the poison of distrusting God’s good will. The people got the message and quickly repented their speaking against the Lord. In response Moses was instructed by the LORD to fashion a serpent out of bronze and impale it on a pole with the command that any who were bitten to look at it for healing.

This seems an odd solution to the problem. Why did God not simply withdraw the serpents? While this might have been a sufficient answer to the prayers of the people, simply removing the serpents would not have continued the correction. Instead, a new life-giving command was given to the people, that would not only answer their prayer for healing, it would also be an on-going reminder that faith in the Word of God is what saves.

Here John makes a similar application to the cross of Christ. On the cross we still see the sting of sin and death, but at the same time, we see in Jesus the death of death and the end of sin, and are urged to look upon him for life and healing in faith. Here God acts to save his people from the poison of the serpent.

Fri: *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

It has always struck me that this and the verse which follows it no longer represent words of Jesus but are an editorial comment from John himself, not unlike those which are in the first chapter. I say this because these

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verses might be understood to be mini-sermons, as they state directly and simply the substance of the Gospel. Luther called 3:16 “the Gospel in a nutshell.”

First and foremost is the one who is lifted up, the Son of God identified as a love gift to the world. Here there is no elaborate theory of atonement set out, for the mechanisms of salvation (here simply stated as ‘eternal life’) is quite beside the point, what matters is that it is a gift. This gift is not an object, a thing, but a person. It is a gift that comes to us, and unwraps itself, revealing to us wisdom, light, and love.

This gift is ours by faith, meaning that it is ours to take hold of, grasp, cling to, take to ourselves. It is ours to use. For John, eternal life is not something which begins at the pearly gates, but begins now. The Son is given to us as a gift of love, to teach us love, to call us to love, to be bearers of love and in love to bring this Good News to the world. We should never forget that this most well-known of all the verses of the New Testament, does not speak of individual salvation but of the salvation of the world, so great is the love, so great is the gift.

Sat: *God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

I particularly included this verse in our meditations for Lent, because it is every bit as important as the more famous verse which it follows. Sadly many people can hear and speak John 3:16 not as Gospel but as Law, as a demand and not a gift. Standing by itself John 3:16 can be heard as a “take it or leave it” proposition, but with verse 17 there can be no mistaking what God’s purpose and will is, nor can there be a doubt about what the effect of gift of the Son on the world is.

Here John’s message and Paul’s come together. We might think of this as a parallel to the thundering words of Romans 8 “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Not only is there salvation for all in Jesus, Jesus is at work through the Spirit bringing all people to himself. This is his work, his mission, his purpose, his life. It is Jesus who brings about the new birth in faith, by being who he is, proclaiming the love of God in word and deed, showing God’s compassion, mercy and steadfast love, without exception, without limit, without end.

When in Acts Peter proclaims “there is salvation in no one else” it is not so much a claim of exclusion as inclusion. What he means and what John says here is that no other system or would be savior can deliver to us the heart of God as Jesus does; all others come short and fail to create true faith in the true God in us. Here we are assured the way to the kingdom of God remains accessible and open, for Christ is ever standing at the all our crossroads declaring “I am the way, the truth and the life.”