

First Sunday in Lent
Year C

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

One of the joys of children is their desire to learn, to understand, to inquire about the unknown. The way they learn is through questions - why? As any parent knows, the why questions continue. Why does this happen? But, why? But, why? Finally, we might just say, because that is the way it is. In other words, we have expended our knowledge and do not ourselves know the answer.

As I was reading the gospel passage this week and trying to discern how I would approach it this morning, I came to the question, why? Why was Jesus led into the wilderness? Why did Jesus need to be tempted? Why do we have this story at all? We have all read many explanations which may or may not be satisfying to our minds.

One the most common explanations contains the analogy of Jesus' experience and the Exodus trials of Israel. This begins with the setting in the wilderness and the duration of forty days versus forty years. It continues with the actual temptations. There is the comparison of the temptation of turning stones into bread and the manna from heaven. Each of the temptations has a corollary to the nation-building experience of Israel.

Another explanation is how each of these temptations foreshadows Jesus' ministry of feeding the hungry, ruling the world justly in the heavenly kingdom, and serving God faithfully, even to the cross. There is much to be said for these, but is that really why Jesus had to experience the forty days of fasting, only to be followed by these episodes of temptation?

I believe a key to understanding Luke's presentation of this experience can be found in how he lays out these early stories of Jesus' life. Luke begins with the nativity stories of John and Jesus, Jesus' early childhood, and the beginning of John's ministry. Unlike the sequence in Matthew, Luke places the next three passages in a very deliberate order - the Baptism of Jesus, the ancestry of Jesus, and then the story of the temptation. Also, there is a difference in the two genealogies as told by Matthew and Luke. While Matthew traces Jesus' ancestors back to David, underscoring that important tie, Luke goes all the way back to Adam, the first man. This, in my view, is the critical point. Luke is comparing the temptation of Jesus to the temptation of Adam.

In Jewish theology, Adam is the "son of God," the first created. As we read in Genesis, Adam was tempted by Satan to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Adam had been told by God that he could eat of the fruit of any of the trees in the Garden except that one tree. This set up the first temptation - the fruit looked good, and there was the possibility of gaining knowledge from eating it, so why not? Satan was testing Adam's resolve to obey God versus his desire to eat of this fruit. As we know, Adam failed.

Jesus is often called “the second Adam.” As we know from the nativity story, Jesus is the Son of God. As with Adam, Satan desires to test Jesus’ conviction to obey God. Thus, we have this story of the temptation. Satan comes at the end of Jesus’ forty day fast, when He might be the most vulnerable. This was the time to attack.

In each of the temptations, Jesus responds by quoting from Deuteronomy. But, beyond the link to the Exodus story, these quotations are linked to the Shema, the prayer every Jew recites twice a day - “Here, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” These words are found immediately before the passages Jesus quotes. And, they are at the core of the relationship we are to have with God. Jesus places His relationship with God above all His personal needs.

We are given a new example to follow. No longer are we bound to follow Adam and relive his failure. The chain of falling subject to the temptations of this world is broken for us. Jesus has given us the example and the tools to resist the temptations that come our way. The only question is, how will we respond? Will we follow the lead of Adam and succumb to that which is appealing to our senses, or will we follow the example of Jesus and resist?

The great hope we have in this is that we do not need to rely on our own strengths and abilities. God has given us the script to follow and the power of the Holy Spirit to help us. Whenever we feel the tug of temptation, we only need to look to Jesus for our direction. Paul tells us that we can overcome all things through the power of the Holy Spirit. We only need to rest in that strength and trust God to see us through.