

Epworth Chapel on the Green
February 21, 2010
First Sunday of Lent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Psalm 91:9-15
Romans 10:5-13
Luke 4:1-13

Our Gospel lesson today comes to us as one of the most familiar texts of the New Testament, and consequently, one of the most difficult to preach. It's the problem of familiarity. The more a text is read, the more difficult it can be to truly *hear* it.

The story shows us Jesus as he is led into the desert, where he is tempted by Satan to feed the hungry of the world, to lay claim to the kingdoms of the world, and to reveal his true identity to the world.

In his response to this situation, Jesus walks away from one kind of life in favor of another. He embodies the Gospel, and the heart of Lent, for that matter. For the heart of Lent, and of the Gospel, is *metanoia*, what we know as *repentance*. It involves a turning *from*, and a turning *toward*. Following Jesus is a constant process of orientation and reorientation, of turning away from one kind of life in favor of another.

This story is not just a picture of what Jesus does. It is a picture of what God does, and shows us an oft-forgotten truth: That God does not merely stand off at a

distance and empathize with our humanity; God *identifies* with our humanity by becoming human.

In the person of Jesus, God shows us his complete identification with our humanity, our frailty, and our weakness. Nowhere is this more evident than in this text, and yet it is easily missed here if we are not careful. For what is Jesus doing when he responds to these temptations? How is Jesus turning away from one kind of life in favor of another kind of life?

In his response here, Jesus *chooses* to let go of his supernatural power and control, and *chooses* instead to live within the boundaries of human life and existence.

Do you recall the apostle Paul's description of Jesus in his letter to the Philippians? Speaking of Jesus, Paul says: "Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men."
(KJV)

Another version translates it as: "In his very nature he was God. But he did not think that being equal with God was something he should hold on to. Instead, he made himself nothing. He took on the very nature of a servant. He was made in human form." (NIV Reader's Edition)

Of all the temptations Jesus ever faced, rarely has it occurred to me that perhaps the most brutal one involved the temptation to grab back onto his divinity when God had sent him to be born, suffer, and die as a *human* being.

And Jesus, of course, was not the only one to encounter temptation. For modern life also offers us countless ways to be distracted from God's purposes. It's just that our temptations are often less dramatic than what we see here in Luke's Gospel. For us, temptation and evil often come in more subtle, less overt ways.

A possible illustration of this is the Greek term translated here "devil." This term can also be translated "one who stirs things up," or "one who throws things around." He tempts us in subtle, subversive ways.

For example, we might be tempted to do *wrong* things for *right* reasons.

We might be tempted to do *right* things for *wrong* reasons.

We might be tempted to do good and noble things that are not God's plan or are not in God's time for us.

In some ways, I think Lent is a microcosm of the larger Christian journey which we travel. For in this season we are asked to stop, to pause, to reflect on how things really are. And what we see is that we are constantly confronted with a choice between the narrow road and the broad road, and the one who likes to "stir things up" is always lobbying for us to choose the easy way,

always seducing us to compromise,

always offering us a short cut.

Always trying to convince us that we can attain the *end* God has in mind for us without following the *means* God has in mind for us.

The Good News today is that Jesus shows us that it is possible to choose God's way and say "yes" to God's will. You may have to travel through the heat of the desert to do it. But by God's grace *all* things are possible.

As we come to the Lord's Table on this first Sunday of Lent, I remind you that we are engaged in a battle of cosmic proportions. It is a struggle for our lives, for our very souls. Sometimes it involves traveling through the desert, where everything must be stripped away from us so that God has our complete attention.

If what I've described sounds like you this morning, take heart. You needn't fear the desert. For when you come to the place where God is all you have, you'll find he is all you need. And the bread and wine are offered to you this morning to sustain you along the way.

So be of good cheer. The One who forsook one way of life in favor of another has prevailed. By his grace, so will you.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.