

Lent 1 2019

Deuteronomy 26:1–11, Psalm 91, Romans 10:4-13, Luke 4:1-13

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Lent and Advent are both seasons of penance. Times when we pause, reflect, watch and wait for the coming of the Lord. We observe Advent when the days are growing shorter and the nights longer. This increasing darkness highlights the sense of a world in crisis, a world on the verge of total destruction or on the verge of miracle.

During the Lent, the days are growing longer. We are winter-weary and ready for spring to burst forth. This longing for new life is coupled with an anticipation of Easter or Resurrection Day. As we lean toward this glorious moment, we are leaning toward our own rebirth, our own baptism. Lent is a journey where we rehearse afresh our own coming to faith, our own glorious baptism into Christ and His Church. It is a season a repentance. Just as some people begin plowing the land to prepare for planting, we are seeking to plow the ground of our heart that we might turn to the Lord in a deeper way and be open and prepared for the new season of spiritual pruning, planting, and growing in our lives.

We pray with the Psalmist,

²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart;

Try me, and know my anxieties;

²⁴ And see if *there is any* wicked way in me,
And lead me in the way everlasting.¹

Lent and Advent are two pauses in the yearly cycle where we ask God to search us afresh and lead us into the way of His life and light. In our Gospel reading today, Jesus is tempted for 40 days by the devil. He has entered into the story of human temptation: Adam and Eve, the story of Moses and the Children of Israel, the story of humanity turning away from the Father in the hour of trial.

But Jesus turns toward the Father in the hour of trial. In other words, Jesus enters into the Garden of Eden and rejects the temptation of the Evil One. Jesus enters into the wilderness journey of Israel and turns the trials to praise instead of rebellion. He is turning the whole story of humanity toward the Father.

Though each of us have doubted God, been seduced by our own desires, harbored anger and unforgiveness in our hearts, and even questioned God's goodness, Jesus has not forsaken us in our sin. He has entered into our stories and is leading us back to the Father.

Thus I might speak of Lent as The Beautiful Journey. We focus on Jesus, Beautiful One, who has captured our hearts and is leading us into his love, into the full light of His glory. We see a hint of that glorious path in our Deuteronomy reading this morning.

The Lord took us out of slavery, out of Egypt, by His strong hand and long arm, he led us, he sustained us with signs and wonder. He didn't forsake us, but brought us home. To a glorious home of abundant food and drink and laughter and love. All we can do is simply return these gifts of love in worship and thanksgiving. Rejoicing in our families, our homes, and loving the weakest among us with His great love.

¹ *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Ps 139:23–24.

Even today we stand in the promise of Deuteronomy 26 and experience of a bit of the earthly promise of His overwhelming blessings even as we long for the fulness of His blessing in the days ahead and the life beyond this life.

In Lent, we rehearse this journey toward the glory of God, the beatific vision, beholding our Lord face to face. On this most beautiful journey, we ask the Lord to search us and know and reveal our hearts. We ask him to test us even as he tested the children of Israel, that he might reveal of need for grace and lead us more fully into the way of light and life and holiness.

With this in mind, I want to briefly reflect on today's Gospel reading. Jesus is led by the Spirit into this season of testing. The passage from Luke indicates that this is a 40-day period of testing, but he highlights only three specific instances: the devil tempts Jesus to turn stone to bread, the devil tempts Jesus to worship him, and the devil tempts Jesus to throw himself off the Temple and get the angels to rescue him.

As Jesus responds to these temptations, He alludes to the story of the children of Israel. Each time, he quotes a passage from Deuteronomy that speaks to the wilderness journey of Israel.

Responding to the temptation to turn the stones into bread, Jesus says, "It is written, '*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.*'"² This is a quote from Deuteronomy 8 when Moses is preparing the community to enter the Promised Land. He reminds them that the wilderness was a place of testing and training. He says,

² And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. ³ And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.³

In the wilderness, the people are being tested and taught to trust in the Word of the Lord. Israel will become a people rooted in the spoken word of God: not defined by giant architectural masterpieces like Egypt, not defined by the artistic and philosophic glories of Greece, not defined by the military might of Rome, but a people whose very identity is shaped by the future promise of God, the Lord of all. Jesus fulfills the call of Israel and the hope of all nations by living as a man who trusts in the Word of the Lord. The Son follows the Father, yields to the Spirit, and trusts that He is being guided each step of the way. He is both fulfilling the pattern of humanity even as he is making a way for us to live by trust in the Father alone.

Next Jesus is tempted to worship the devil in exchange for all power and all glory. Once again, Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy, "Get behind Me, Satan! For it is written, '*You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.*'"⁴

Israel was tempted to worship the idols of the surrounding nations. This often included simply adding the idolatry to the worship of YHWH or to use practices of idolatry when worshipping YHWH.

² *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Lk 4:4.

³ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Dt 8:2–3.

⁴ *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Lk 4:8.

While it might seem that they shouldn't be guilty if their object with the Lord, we must remember that these practices shaped the people. Idolatry dehumanizes and reduces our ability to enter into truly loving relationships with God or other people. Idolatry runs parallel with adultery all through Scripture because both lead away from covenantal relationship. Idolatry often involved sexual immorality.

It models a way of behavior rooted in unfaithfulness. But this is just the beginning. The prophets suggests that idolatry deadens our humanity and sensitivity to God and other people: it makes us blind, deaf and dumb. We lose our eyes for the beauty of the Lord, the beauty of our wives, our family, our friends, the beauty of this creation. Instead, we driven by an insatiable desire or lust for the next person, the next thing, the next experience that thrills and delights.

Idolatry disorders our loves. We may still say that we love God and love our family, but we may act in ways or invest our time in ways that indicates we love other things or people more than what is most vital. In Scripture, idolatry so corrupts that it ultimately takes shape in human sacrifice. We end up destroying the very people that we said that we loved.

The only way our loves can be reordered is through the grace of God in the way of Jesus. In Christ, worship is turned to the Father alone. As we look toward the Beautiful One, he can restore our eyes, our ears, our mouths, so that we can truly behold Him and his creation in ways that lead us more deeply into love and a life that turns outward in lovingkindness and service.

Finally, Jesus responds to the temptation to jump off the Temple by saying, "It has been said, '*You shall not tempt the LORD your God.*'"⁵ Once again he is quoting Deuteronomy and referring to the children of Israel who tempted the Lord in the wilderness by threatening revolt against Moses at Massah. In their thirst, they questioned the Lord, Moses, and even suggesting the current situation is worse than Egypt. They began to remember Egypt, while forgetting how the state was killing their sons, enslaving them, threatening them.

The language of testing God indicates that humans are reducing God to their level as creatures and assuming they can pass judgment on him. Scripture reveals this as the height of rebellion. We live in an age where humans feel justified to pass judgment on God or the idea of God and His Word on regular basis. But we must always remember that he stands over above us testing us in his Word in and our lives. Revealing our own sinfulness, brokenness, and readiness to rebel against His love and hurt others and ourselves in the process.

In all three of these temptations, Jesus is doing what Israel and humanity failed to do. He is turning toward the Father and trusting in his faithfulness. During Lent, we rehearse this path of turning toward the Father. Each week, we will reflect on different spiritual disciplines that can help us in our journey of turning toward the Lord.

This morning as I read over the Gospel, I thought of the simple discipline remembering our story by meditating upon God's Word.

When I was in college, I had a dramatic encounter with God's Spirit. It was deeply emotional, involved the spiritual gifts in various ways, and impacted every aspect of my life, but the deep emotions and the experience of spiritual gifts were secondary to the opening of Scripture. No longer was this a silent book of moral obligations that I read out of duty.

It changed from a textbook on holiness to the Living Word addressing to me personally. At times, it felt as though the Lord was sitting beside me speaking to me directly as I read Scripture.

⁵ *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Lk 4:12.

I couldn't quit reading it, soaking in it, learning it. Over the years, I tried all sorts of approaches to Scripture. While in college, I read it through for the first time. I read it with a pen in hand: underlining, adding question marks, writing questions in the margin. Some of it burned in my heart, but other passages didn't make any sense. I loved reading some of the stories of Jesus, but in other stories, he seemed harsh and impatient. Over time, my eyes and heart adapted. Many questions were answered. Other questions appeared. The Word was the place I met the Lord to hear him and talk to him.

Sometimes I only read one passage. For several months at a time, I would read one psalm. I would read it aloud. Listen to it. Pause over phrases. I would pray it for myself and for others. Sometimes it felt like certain verses or words were pumping through my veins.

The Bible became a way I cried out to God when I was troubled and anguished. In fact, during a long season of darkness, I wrote passages on 3 x 5 cards and would read them aloud to keep from thinking. The dark thoughts were so strong, I could only drown them out by reading aloud verse. There were times when music, movies or any other sensation merely added to my sense of darkness. Over time, God's Word seemed to rebuild my inner life and lead my outward to light, to His love.

Gradually, I began to rest in His faithfulness again and His power to lead my out into the light. When I was angry at church splits and the tendency of Christians inability of Christians to love one another, I read and reread and reread John 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17. For about three years, this is all I wanted to read in Scripture.

My own reading was always being deepened, enriched, and expanded in light of other Christian voices from the present and the past. The Scripture opened in new ways I had never seen or heard before. This helped me to realize I was reading the text and listening to the Lord in a community, through a people who had been reading, praying, studying, and teaching God's Word across the ages: from ancient Israel to the early church to the great Reformers to today.

However we approach the Scripture, we should approach it. It is food for the soul. During this Lent, I would pray that each of us might hear the Lord speak afresh in His Word. That as we we the Word, we might encounter the Lord of the Word. Let me conclude with a word from Hans Urs Von Balthasar.

“We yearn to restore our spirits in God, to simply let go in him and gain new strength to go on living. But we fail to look for Him where He is waiting for us, where he is to be found: in His Son, who is His Word....we fail to listen where God speaks; where God's Word ran out in the world once for all, sufficient for all ages, inexhaustible. Or else we think that God's Word as been heard on earth for so long that by now it is almost used up, that it is about time for some new word, as if we had the right to demand one. We fail to see that it is we ourselves who are used up and alienated, whereas the Words resounds with the same vitality and freshness as ever; it is as near to us as it always was. “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (Rom 10:8).