

“to be tempted by the devil”
A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston
Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, March 8, 2020
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11

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. Matthew 4:1-11

Will you pray with me. Compassionate and patient God, be with us in these moments while we contemplate living up to your desires for us. Help us to believe in your promise that you will deliver us from evil even in the midst of so many temptations. Amen.

Here’s a few questions for today, which I’ll ask you to ponder but not share with us this morning. Have you given up something for Lent? And if so, what are you giving up and why are you giving it up? These are not simple questions. It’s the what and why that cause introspection....

I ask these questions because a few days ago I found myself thinking about the question, “Why do we go through this whole ‘Lent thing’?” Why don’t we just talk about the Easter message throughout the year? Jesus Christ risen. And in his risenness, we as Christians, are signed in, sealed and delivered to life everlasting. All will be well. This IS the bottom line and the traditional understanding of much of the Christian teachings in the New Testament of the Bible.

Why do we have to go through this “serious” period of thinking about our sins, and repenting of our wrongdoings, and giving up something for Lent? It’s so darn depressing, isn’t it? Why not just move on to the “rest of the story” in Christ risen? One reason might stem from the story we heard this morning from the Gospel of Matthew about Jesus’ temptations to follow the devil in his forty days of wandering in the desert, fasting all the while. Our Lenten journey calls us to remember Jesus’ self-denial and the temptations he did not succumb to.

But maybe, just maybe, there’s another reason for going through all this. It has to do with freedom and responsibility. You can *choose* to follow a Lenten journey, or not. No one from on high – not the President, not me as your pastor, not even God can *order*

you to observe Lent and give up something during Lent. I never did before I began seminary in 1995, and I'm still here to tell about it.

As I may have shared with some of you, prior to entering seminary, experiencing Lent was *not* in my life. I was *married* on Good Friday in 1970 because I didn't know any better. I had no idea that Good Friday stands as a remembrance of the day of Jesus' crucifixion. It was a convenient day for our wedding, for me and my fiancé.... as it was during our Spring break from college. I knew Good Friday was some sort of Christian holiday, and I guess I figured it must be a "good" holiday.

As I look back on that time now, I can appreciate the painful look on the face of Dr. Sexton, the chaplain for Miami University in Ohio where I was a senior. When I asked about Friday, March 27th, as a wedding date, he looked at me, paused and then said slowly, "Well, I guess.... I could marry you... on Good Friday." I didn't have a clue why he sounded so stunned and unsure!

As a child, Easter was the day my father brought home all the extra Easter candy left over at the five and ten store, G. C. Murphy Co. in Washington, D.C., where he was the manager. I'd sit in the middle of the dining room floor and eat chocolate to my heart's content on Easter Sunday morning, having not a clue what Easter meant beyond chocolate Easter bunnies. I was a heavy child....

Every year since I've been in ministry, I still have to smile when I think of preparing sermons and study groups and reflection questions for parishioners around the season of Lent and Easter. I wouldn't have been caught dead thinking about any of this prior to the early 1990's. Religion was a crutch weak people relied upon, I thought. I was more "enlightened" than that, I thought....

But things change. Life intrudes. Personal crises happen. Dark times come into an otherwise happy and relatively uneventful secular life. Crutches come in handy. I know I've shared with you before one of my favorite quotes of theologian William Sloane Coffin. He once wrote, "It is often said that the Church is a crutch. Of course it's a crutch. What makes you think you don't limp?"¹

A person starts to pay attention to the fact that she has been limping for a long time in a spiritual wilderness. And she realizes there just has to be more to living than gathering material possessions, playing golf on Sunday mornings, meeting sales quotas, and planning three vacations a year to Maine. Relying on something more than one's own talents and desires and bank account begins to beckon. Suddenly life is not at all like what it was before....

Jesus enters in very unexpected ways and says, "Follow me." (Matthew 4:19, Mark 1:17, Luke 5:10-11) I won't detail this morning all the ways that happened to me, but to say.... everything changes. What you read, what you think about, what you do, what you care about, what you dream about, what you spend your money on, what is important to you – it all changes.

At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, right after his baptism, three of the four Gospels tell us he was tested in the wilderness, tempted by the devil to focus on meeting

¹William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, p. 137.

physical bodily needs, attaining personal prestige, and making use of magical powers rather than trusting in God. This story still amazes me.

Why didn't Jesus give in? What kept him from falling for the devil's ploys? Why didn't he just walk back into town, find a nice Jewish girl, get married, raise a family, maybe do a little preaching in the local temple, and live to a ripe old age as the wise local sage and story teller? What do you think? Why didn't he just do all of that instead of stand up to the devil? (get responses)

The first verse of our passage for this morning gives us the best answer I can think of – “The Holy Spirit led Jesus into the desert, so that the devil could test him.” (Matthew 4:1) Jesus didn't give in and go on his own way because God stopped him from doing that. The Holy Spirit led Jesus into the desert *to see what he was really made of*. He didn't go into the death-dealing desert wilderness because he wanted to lose forty pounds! He went because “something” told him he had to go. “Something” led him to being tested as he had not been tested before. “Something” wouldn't let him alone or be alone, even when the devil enticed him with promises of physical nourishment, power, and prestige.

Jesus knew his holy scriptures. He could out proof text his devil opponent with the very best of the rabbis. He was God's prodigy son who simply would not and could not be bought at any price. And in the same way, at the end of his very short time in ministry, he still couldn't be bought at any price.

But he *paid* the ultimate price with his life as he bore the sin of the world, to bear the evil of the world. He did this, according to the Gospel stories of him, so we might know, two thousand years later, the good news of Jesus as resurrected Christ for those of us who choose to identify with the Christian faith.

Let's admit it, wilderness time is a fact of life for each of us at some point, or perhaps many points, in our lives. These are the times we wonder if we can get through the crises at all. These are the times when the temptation to give up the fight, or give in to forces stronger than us, is difficult to overcome.

We are in the midst of a worldwide crisis, and every day a more likely national crisis, because of a virus that is spreading too rapidly. We can't give up the fight, we can't ignore the reality of this challenge. We *can* do everything possible to get through it and learn from it. Wash your hands. Don't touch your face. Stay out of crowds. Don't panic, it won't help. And remember....

We have a friend.... we have a friend in our brother Jesus who hands us God's crutch and reminds us in this Lenten season what to do until the storms pass by. He reminds us who will stand by us “when the storms of life are raging, in the midst of tribulation, in the midst of faults and failures, in the midst of persecution, even when we're growing old and feeble.”² Jesus will stand by, while we wash our hands and care for one another.... as the storms of life are raging. Let the people say, “Amen.”

²From the hymn *Stand By Me*, words and music by Charles Albert Tindley, appearing in *The United Methodist Hymnal*.