

I did some research on Lent for the Confirmation class, and thought I'd share some of it this morning, too. My home church growing up didn't observe Lent, or Ash Wednesday, just picking up before Easter with Holy Week - Palm Sunday and Good Friday. I knew that my Roman Catholic friends "gave something up for Lent," but since my home church avoided anything that sounded like the Catholics, but overall, Lent was a new idea for me when I joined the Presbyterian Church in college. Since many of us here this morning have backgrounds in various denominations, too, maybe it's a new idea for more than just me.

I remember being intrigued by the idea of the church year when studying in seminary - different colors in the paraments in the sanctuary, different observances in preparation for Christmas and Easter. Advent wreaths, Maundy Thursday foot washing services, Good Friday services that end in darkness - this "acting out" of the story of Jesus in every year fascinated me and drew me.

Actually, even the Presbyterian Church was going through a re-discovery of these traditions in our Christian history, especially as we as a denomination participated in more ecumenical discussions, and became less defensive about not seeming to be so Roman Catholic. Our worshipbook that came out in **1970** included services of morning and evening prayer, renewal of baptism, Lenten litanies and even an order of service for the Easter Vigil, an ancient tradition of the church to carry new light into the sanctuary for the resurrection, and the time when adult converts were baptized. This was just a couple years before I entered seminary, and worship classes were introducing us new pastors-to-be to these new ideas. My next-door neighbor back when we had little kids together attended a pretty progressive Catholic parish, and she would come to our 11 pm Christmas Eve service- it was close by our houses and she could get her kids back in bed quickly - and I went with her to the Easter Vigil, where she told me the priest wouldn't care if I took communion, and where adults baptisms were taking place by immersion in a rented hot tub.. I met her priest after the service and asked what the liturgical name of the cloth draped on the hot tub was. He laughed.

Every year on the first Sunday in Lent, we read an account of Jesus being driven into the desert by the Holy Spirit after he is baptized by his cousin John the Baptizer, where he fasts for 40 days and wrestles with the devil before he takes up his ministry. Obviously the Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark and Luke all have an account of this, were not there, so Jesus must have told them – or others - of his experience. It's a very stylized account of three temptations and his responses to them; I'm sure we're supposed to know that these three temptations are summaries of some sort, and are full of meaning. I mean, imagine facing the kind of call that Jesus did, and what sort of inner wrestlings he would have to have before beginning. Imagine how his heart and mind and soul had to be prepared. The Scriptures are very careful to tell us that he was tempted in every way as we are – he was fully human after all – yet somehow he saw through them and resisted what must have been terrible pressure from the forces he was preparing to fight.

Leaders and public people of all kinds are subject to many pressures and temptations. Those who succumb make the papers and the tabloids on a regular basis. And mentally – it has always seemed strange to me that often mental delusions seem to have a religious component, a fixation on for example, the Book of Revelations, or thinking God told them to do something. Jesus was going to have to walk a fine line, needing the inner strength to withstand all kinds of things both inner and outer. His ministry wasn't just a walk in the park with the Holy Spirit whispering the right things to do – we're told that Jesus sweat blood in prayer to endure to the end. That must have been some prayer.

So I tend to look at the three temptations told in the scriptures as metaphors for certain subjects he had to work through and answer, which we all do, too. The first was the devil suggesting that, as he was starving, to make stones into bread: to use his powers to benefit himself, feed himself, satisfy his own desires. All of us face this to some extent – to be self-absorbed, using our gifts and abilities to satisfy the desires and needs that drive us, often unconsciously. Thinking that this is the purpose of life, this rather narcissistic striving for goods here, being driven by our desires. I don't just mean the kinds that get us on the front pages – we can be driven by fears, by the need to be in charge, by needing to win, by the need for approval, by all kinds of things that gain control of us. We are all driven by unconscious things – things that happened in our childhoods, decisions we unknowingly made in response to life events – events that may be long over but which still

have a grip on us. Looking into ourselves and seeing these things is hard work, and God's Spirit, as it drives us towards wholeness, will bring us face-to-face with the work we need to do when we are ready.

Jesus' answer is to recognize that it's not bread we're hungry for, but God. We don't live by bread alone. Yes, we need certain things to sustain life – but the main thing we need is God. It's not money, food, excesses of any kind, power or anything else that can fill what St. Thomas Aquinas called the “God-shaped vacuum” inside us.

Next the devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and offers to give him all their praise and power and glory if only Jesus will worship him. As I see it, this temptation is the lure of power. We have a common saying that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Jesus was obviously a gifted and powerful man, and there were probably a lot of ways he could have used it. This was one of the big themes in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy – the power of that ring worked on anyone who had it, and led to destruction. Its lure called to everyone in the story, even those who knew its terrible effects and were working to destroy it. Political folks like presidents as well as local figures, athletes, preachers with congregations both large and small, ceo's of corporations as well as managers of fast-food joints – keeping hold of power is big lure. Parents can abuse their power over children; attendants on the elderly can abuse their power; it's not just elected folks or prominent folks.

Jesus' answer is that all power belongs to God and is submitted to God. Only God is worshipped, nothing else, no one else. All is under God.

The final temptation in the desert is to test God, to expect God to perform on command, to try and manipulate God. Using words from the Psalm we read a bit earlier, the Devil says, “Throw yourself off here- God will catch you.” Trying to force God's hand, trying to move before it's God's time and God's plan, thinking we know what should happen and expecting God to fall in line – this is a temptation all the time. All the time. I'm reminded of how totally unsubtle my daughter was at 3 years old, sidling up to me and stroking my hair and telling me how pretty I was – and then asking for roller blades. Sometimes we pray like that, and usually we get about the same reaction my daughter got – I laughed out loud. God's not a vending machine or an ATM. As we get more mature we can get more subtle, but the evidence that we are testing God comes out when we're angry at

God for not doing what we prayed for. This is probably the temptation that got Judas in trouble – wanting to force Jesus’ hand to become a literal freedom-fighter for his people.

Jesus’ simple answer is that he won’t test God.

What insight Jesus had into his own temptations! What submission and obedience to God he accepted! What a grasp he had of his difficult call! And what deep spiritual understanding he had of God’s will, and human destiny, and the human soul.

We read and ponder these things here at the beginning of Lent, going into these 40 days ahead in a time for self-examination, reflection, giving and giving up, prayer and other spiritual practices. May this journey be for us a time of deepening love for God, deepening understanding of our own ministries, and deepening commitment to God’s call. AMEN.