

I Lent (c)
 Lk 4.1-13
 Fr. Patrick Allen
 Church of the Holy Communion

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As you all know, this morning marks the first Sunday in Lent, and so it may be helpful, here at the outset to simply ask, *What is Lent for? What is it supposed to do?* It's a question worth asking, I think, because there is some evident confusion out there.

This past Wednesday, the blogs I check regularly and my little Facebook news feed lit up with folks announcing that they had received their Ashes and sharing what they were "giving up" for Lent. Which would be fine, I guess, except that these people are in some degree known to me, and I know that whatever they may be giving up for Lent, they are not likely to take on attending Mass any more in Lent than they do in the rest of the year.

So, what's the attraction? It may be, I suppose, that they are attracted by the countercultural *frisson* of a mark of mortality in our passionately death denying society. Or, again, maybe it's the countercultural cool of saying "no" to some desired thing in a land where we demand and expect the instant gratification of every bodily appetite.

In any event, it may be helpful here and for us to remember that, in the life of the Church, Lent does not exist for its own sake. It is, of course, not a pose to assume for the sake of coolness any more than it is a standalone season for self-help and behavior modification. In other words, ashes are not an accessory, and a fast is not a diet.

Rather, Lent is directed towards an end, a spiritual goal. Lent serves a purpose, and we were reminded of that purpose on Ash Wednesday when the celebrant made the invitation to a holy Lent, reminding us that "the first Christians observed with great devotion the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection, and it became the custom of the Church to prepare for them by a season of penitence and fasting."

So, there you go. The point is not to drop a couple of pounds by avoiding sweets, nor to score some Facebook irony points. And the point is not even to make some progress simply in the discipline of our desires – as worthy and necessary a thing as that is for Christian living.

Rather, we undertake to keep a holy Lent in order to place ourselves in a better position to experience anew the great acts of our Redemption, to "observe with great devotion" the gracious and decisive action of God which turns rebels into loving children: *Christ's agony and bloody sweat; his Cross and Passion; his precious Death and Burial; his glorious Resurrection.*¹

So there is a devotional dynamic at work in our Lenten disciplines. All that we do in Lent – marking our mortality; our penance, fasting, and self-denial; devotions and good works we take on; alms we give – all are things we *do* only in order that, when Holy Week arrives, we may better be able to *receive*. We empty ourselves in order that we might be filled. We may even say, at the very least and perhaps also the very best, Lenten disciplines, as we struggle with them, show us our need of the redemption that God provides.

Which brings us back to this morning and this story we always read about on the first Sunday of Lent, this account which is really the charter for our own Lent: Jesus, following his baptism in the Jordan, full of the Spirit and led by the Spirit, goes out into the wilderness and himself fasts for forty days, at the end of which, hungry and tired, he is tempted by the devil.

It is always tempting (ha, ha) to come to this text and run it through the “Lent-as-self-help” matrix, to mine it for strategies and tactics and tools for dealing with our own temptations – and it may be that there is something along those lines to be found here. And it may be likewise tempting to see in this text our Lord as a kind of spiritual superman, doing battle with his arch-nemesis the Devil, able to shake off the lure of earthly power and control in a single Bible verse, as if he had special reserves of temptation resisting power unavailable to the rest of us.

But to fall for either of those interpretive temptations is, I think, to miss the point, and to miss it by forgetting what has come before in this Gospel, in which St. Luke has been at pains to show us a fully human Jesus, born of Mary – who, as Fr. Sanderson reminded us last Sunday, when he scraped his elbow did not show titanium instead of bone, and who, as St. Luke reminds us this morning, when he fasted was hungry, and was so weakened by his physical hunger that the devil saw this as an opportune time for a spiritual attack. All of which is to say, with the Epistle to the Hebrews, he was “in every respect tempted as we are, yet did not sin.”ⁱⁱ

What we see, then, in this story of our Lord’s temptation in the wilderness, is not so much the skill set of a master temptation resistance technician for our imitation, but the incredible mercy and gracious condescension of God in Christ for our contemplation – who humbles himself for us, is born of a woman for us, and endures temptation for us with only the resources and resolve available to each of us. For us, he is one of us.

So it may be that insofar as we can use this account in facing down our own temptations, as we must, it is not so much in copying the techniques Christ employed, but in the remembrance – the existential, in-the-moment, calling to mind – that he is with us; that, even in temptation to evil, *for us he is one of us*, sharing in our humanity that we may come to share in his divinity.ⁱⁱⁱ

Which means that the key resource for resisting temptation is no “trick of the trade,” but the knowledge of his love, more precious by far than all that the world, the flesh, and the devil have to offer.

The temptations of Jesus in the wilderness show us that he is not a remote lawgiver, not even a kind and encouraging coach on the sideline, but a brother and comrade in the daily struggle to love the lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind, and to love our neighbor as our self, and to do so in every circumstance in which we find ourselves, good, bad and ugly, even hungry and alone.

And when we come to see him as brother and comrade, to see that *for us he is one of us*, then we will be ready to observe, with great devotion, the days of Lord’s passion and resurrection, and Lent will have done its work in us.

May God grant us grace, then, to keep a holy Lent.

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ⁱ From the Great Litany, which precedes Mass on this day.

ⁱⁱ Heb 4.15

ⁱⁱⁱ At the blending of water and wine in the Mass, the priest quietly prays, “By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.”