

So, here we are at the first Sunday of Lent again. Feels a little early in the year for this strange liturgical season. Unlike Advent – a season folks can really get behind with it's lighting of candles and the fact that it takes place in a month saturated with commercials and print ads to remind you that Christmas is coming – Lent is often reduced down to forty days when you give something up. People don't seem to get as excited about a season of repentance and spiritual renewal culminating on Easter Sunday. Maybe the whole dying and rising is a bit too morbid for us to "look forward" to each year; maybe it's harder to keep our minds focused on this season when popular culture – with the notable exception of the Cadbury bunny – really doesn't seem to care about Lent or even Easter; or maybe it's a personal challenge for each of us to walk through the season of Lent because it is a time of repentance, of recognizing we are sinners, of trying to understand more fully what the promise of God's grace means for each of us in a very real way. Now I'll admit, that doesn't have the same ring as getting ready for the birth of a Savior, but arguably the season of Lent is certainly as important as a part of the path of faith we journey on every year.

So, with the imposition of ashes on our foreheads this past Wednesday – reminding us of our own mortality, we gather here today to begin that Lenten journey once again. A journey which will end with the empty cross and promises of the abundance of God's grace for each and every one of us.

And every year, this is the first scripture lesson that greets us, Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Just after Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist – just after there is some sort of "confirmation" from God that Jesus is God's, "beloved, with whom [God] is well pleased." Just after this amazing inauguration of sorts, Jesus is driven into the desert by the Holy Spirit for forty days and nights before he can even begin his preaching ministry. Do not pass go, certainly don't collect two hundred dollars – just send that man to the desert.

And so, in the desert, near the end of those forty days and nights, the tempter, the devil, Satan comes to him and tempts him three times, whisking him from the desert to the highest pinnacle of the temple to a mountain top: Since you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread, since you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, you can have the world if you fall down and worship me. And three times, Jesus resisted most eloquently with words of scripture, reminding the tempter that humanity does not live by bread alone, that we are not to put God to the test, and that we are to worship the Lord our God and no one else.

How can we possibly relate to this story? After all, we don't all normally have face to face discussions with the devil. As Presbyterians, we don't often talk about evil a personified being at all – as "the devil" or as "Satan." Instead we recognize the evil within us all, our inherent inability to stop sinning, and our participation in systemic evil – the evil that is manifest when we participate in unjust structures in society and make no effort to change them. This is the type of evil we discuss and explore. And yet – that's not entirely what we see here. Instead Jesus is having a face to face discussion with the devil, with the devil poking and prodding Jesus and Jesus rising above it and remaining true to God.

So where can we find ourselves in this scripture? After all – these aren't exactly temptations we would face: no one is going to ask us to create food where there is none, or to throw ourselves from a building or, except in rare cases, to worship the devil just to prove how good a Christian we are. And after all, the tempter wasn't asking Jesus to prove he was the Son of God – just by the way he asks the question, any first-century Greek-speaker would recognize that the tempter already knew just who Jesus was. No, if we look more closely at the text, we can see that, "The basic, underlying temptation that Jesus shared with us is the temptation to treat God as less than God. To treat God as less than God. Think about that:

We may not be tempted to turn stones into bread, but we are constantly tempted to mistrust God's readiness to empower us to face our trials. How often do we believe that we can't do something, that we just can't deal with what's right in front of us, that we've just been given too much on our plate to handle it all – that God

needs to take some of the burden from us? When the reality is, God has already equipped us to handle every obstacle and trial in our path. I don't mean by ourselves, necessarily, though God equips our minds, hearts and spirits, but God has also provided us with an entire community of faith to empower us day by day. Can we trust God to give us the power to face our lives day by day?

And none of us is likely to put God to the test by leaping from a cliff, but we are frequently tempted to question God's helpfulness when things go awry; we forget the sure promise, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (II Cor. 12:9). For me, this is the greatest temptation I give into. When things do go wrong, or even when they have the potential to go wrong, I cannot give up fretting and worrying and sometimes obsessing over them, even when I've been in prayer. My ability to remember that God's grace is sufficient is insufficient, and I struggle all the time to trust in God.

Finally, pagan idolatry is more than likely no more a temptation for us than it was for Jesus, but compromise with the ways of the world is a continuing seduction. It is indeed difficult for us to worship and serve God only. We are bombarded with cultural ideals of what we could or "should" be giving priority to in our lives – money, power, position, sex, how we should spend our time and who we should spend it with. Even in this election year, as candidates speak of ideals, we can be tempted to listen only for those policies and laws they will enact that benefit and protect us – our family – and not necessarily "the least of these" whom we are called to serve. Every day as we make choices for ourselves and for our families about how we structure the time spent in our lives, we are responding to temptations.

Thank God we have faith in someone who could face his own temptations, that we do not walk this journey alone. For in our scripture we find Jesus reminds the tempter that faithfulness is commitment to God and God's Word, not the performance of marvelous deeds. The point of the story is not whether Jesus can do these things or not. After all, he will one day feed the hungry, deliver the people from bondage and demonstrate over and over again the amazing power of God. But these things will be accomplished in God's good time and by God's grace and in a way that pleases God, not the crowds, and certainly not the evil one.

To the extent that Jesus' temptation serves as a model for Christians, it might teach us that to be a "Child of God" means to have a trusting relationship to God that does not ask for miraculous exceptions to the limitations of an authentic human life. An authentic human life in which we will fail, we will give in to temptation, we will sin. And as we begin this season of Lent, we are most definitely reminded of that reality. But our reality as believers of Jesus Christ does not end with our realization that we are sinners – it ends with the sure promise found at the end of this Lenten journey that God's grace embodied in the Risen Lord is sufficient – is more than sufficient.

Lent is our time in the wilderness: a season of confession, repentance and spiritual cleansing; an opportune time for personal renewal. As the church does each year, we encourage you to take on a spiritual discipline as a part of your own Lenten journey. For this year, we have provided a simple sheet of scripture and prayers. The prayers are for the morning, during the day and in the evening. They are simple, short and profound. I encourage you to take this sheet with you today – resist the temptation to put it in the recycle basket on your way out – and to use these prayers as you can throughout Lent. If you've already got a sheet like this at home, take this one and give it to a friend. You never know what temptations those around us are facing and how we can be a part of God's empowering to get folks through a difficult time!

Temptation swirls all around us. It may not be as dramatic as Jesus facing the tempter after forty days and nights fasting in the desert, but it is there for each of us. But God empowers us to face each temptation moment by moment, day by day. We are not capable of resisting temptation as Jesus could, but we are assured that we are a forgiven people, and that God's grace is indeed sufficient, no, more than sufficient for us all. May you live into that knowledge in this season of Lent.

And now, to the one who can do far more than we could possibly imagine, be all power and glory, now and forevermore, amen.