

Lent 1 A 2020

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

Psalm 32

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

If we trust the mystery of the incarnation,
Then we need to wrap our minds around the knowledge
That the time Jesus spent alone in the desert
Was grueling.

A time of loneliness,
Discomfort,
Hunger,
Fear.

If we find truth in the improbable possibility
That the infinite source of life and love,
The creating power that keeps the world alive –
God –
came to dwell among us
In the person of Jesus of Nazareth,
If we can begin to imagine
That God limited the divine self,
Accepting the constraints,
The frustrations, the sorrows
Of the way we live as humans in the world,
If we believe this,
Then we need to accept the reality that Jesus struggled,
And suffered,
In this time of testing.

Yes, it was a mystical experience.
A long line of mystics before and after him,
People of every size and shape and tradition
Have gone into the desert
To be alone with God –
And with themselves.
And in that lonely place,
After long fasting,
The visions come.

Yes, it was a mystical experience,
With some beauty and splendor
In the midst of the terror.

Mystical experiences happen within –
But that makes them no less real.
And the temptations with which Jesus struggled
Were very real.

Very few of us have fasted in the desert.
Some among us have recognized an experience as mystical.
But all of us wrestle with temptation –
Huge and life-altering,
Insignificant,
Bothersome,
Mundane or spectacular.
Just like Jesus.

But just because the promise of Jesus is for everyone,
Just because in coming among us
As one of us,
He became just like us,
Does not mean
That his temptations are our temptations.

He is just like us,
And utterly unique,
As are we all.
His temptations are unique to him.
His struggle is unique to him.

If we try to chart our Lenten journey,
Our journey of return,
Reconciliation, truth-seeking and truth-telling,
If we try to chart our Lenten journey
By looking for signs of his temptations
In our own lives,
We may come up short.

Yes, there are those among us
For whom the temptations of Jesus ring true.
We all share some basic fears,
Desires,
Pressures.

So maybe for you,
The desire for power, or control,
Or security, or satisfaction,
Is what motivates you –
And warps your choices and your actions.

If so, then by all means
Sit with Jesus in the desert,
And listen for the voice of the tempter
Luring you to turn stones into bread,
Or to leap from the pinnacle of the temple,
Or to rule the world.

These may be authentic for you.

But when I go into the silent place within,
When I listen to some of you,
It seems to me
That for many of us,
In these times,
There are other temptations
That are no less real.
Less colorful,
But just as real.

The temptation to rage.
The temptation to withdraw.
The temptation to despair.

The temptation to rage assaults us,
Many of us,
Every day as we confront the news of the world.
Leave rage alone,
Urges the psalmist.
It leads only to destruction.*

The rage to which we are tempted
Is not the same as anger.
Anger can be justified,
It can be righteous.
It can be the appropriate reaction
To situations of injustice,
Malice,
Cruelty.
It can be the beginning of truth,
And healing, and reconciliation.

But the rage that tempts us day by day
Is isolating, destructive,
Fruitless.

If you go into your own desert place,
Do you find rage boiling there?

And what about the temptation to withdraw?
When we see so much suffering,
When we struggle with exhaustion,
The temptation to withdraw from the world
Is very real.
The temptation to isolate ourselves,
To retreat under the covers,
To withdraw even from the things that give us pleasure,
The things we know
Would make us feel better.

Isolation is not the same as solitude.
Solitude refreshes,
Isolation robs us of energy.

If you go into your own desert place,
Do you find whispering there
The desire to withdraw from the world?

And what about the temptation to despair?
If we look dispassionately
At the state of the world,
How could we not wonder
If anything we value will survive?
If engagement with the present,
Planning for the future, is utter folly?
How can we not be concerned?

But despair is not the same
As reasonable doubt.
Despair robs us of motivation,
Energy,
The will to keep offering ourselves
To the hope of a good future.

If you go into your own desert place,
Is despair waiting to reach out for you,
Clutch you,
And drag you down?

How do we meet these temptations?
Or, if these are not your struggles,
How do you meet the trials that wait for you,

Jumping out in unguarded moments,
Grabbing you in the middle of the night,
Peeking at you from around the corner of your screen,
Or whatever else you turn to
To distract you?

How do any of us meet these temptations?
What works to keep them at bay –
When anything works?

Well –
What did Jesus do?

How do we ever answer that question?
The situations in which we find ourselves
Are not always covered
In the stories of the gospels.
And the answer,
He would do the loving thing,
Does not always tell us much.

But one wise teacher
Has said this,
If you want to know,
What would Jesus do,
Don't go looking for an example of Jesus
Encountering your precise situation.

Instead, go to the place where Jesus goes,
Try to get into his space,
And from within that space,
Make your own decision.

Start from where Jesus starts.

So the question is not so much,
What would Jesus do,
If Jesus were in my situation,
But, how did Jesus begin,
When he met with a challenge,
Or a dilemma,
Or a decision.

That's clear.
Jesus went to the place of prayer.
He sought solitude,

He offered himself to the mystery,
He listened,
He waited.

And Jesus went to scripture.
He was steeped in the wisdom of his people,
The law, the prophets,
The psalms.
They were ready to give him words,
When words were what he needed.

And Jesus returned to his community.

As soon as he left the desert,
He began to gather a group of friends.
Annoying friends,
Dense friends,
But friends and companions
With whom he could walk,
And talk,
And sit down to share bread and wine and laughter.

And he offered simple acts of healing,
Showed compassion,
Met the needs that were right before him.
He did not heal every leper,
Restore sight to all the blind,
Find everyone who was lost.
But he did the work that was given to him,
That was right under his nose,
And he went looking for the lost and lonely.
He prayed,
He read,
He ate and drank and laughed,
And he acted for healing and justice,
Inclusion and right relationship.

What would Jesus do,
If in this season of Lent
He went into the desert,
And the tempter dangled before him
Rage,
And the longing to withdraw,
And despair?

Though the temptations were different,

He would do the same thing.
He would pray.
He would turn to scripture,
Not for directions,
But for inspiration.
And he would engage,
Over and over,
Day by day,
With his community
Of scared, anxious, bumbling,
Caring, loyal, decent and sometimes wonderful friends.
And he would heal those who were right there,
Seeking healing and acceptance.

Whatever temptations beset you this Lent,
You can do these simple things.
Pray.
Turn to scripture.
Stay connected with community.
Worship.
Show mercy and engage the works of justice.

The temptations won't go away forever.
But it is a better life
To look past them,
And do what can be done,
Than to give up,
Or give in.

What would Jesus do?
What he has always done.
And he invites us to join him.

He is just like us in this.
He knew temptation,
He struggled with it.
And he never gave up.