

**Sunday, March 10, 2019**  
**First Sunday in Lent (Year C)**  
Luke 4.1-13  
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Have you ever struggled with trying to figure out what you were supposed to do? Have you ever had to make a major decision about your future, about a relationship, about your identity? Or if a decision had already been made, perhaps imposed on you by another, have you ever had to try to figure out just what it meant in your life, or just how you were going to make that decision a reality? That's essentially what Jesus is going through in today's Gospel lesson—the story of his temptation. This is a time of discernment for Jesus. He is trying to figure out his life. How to get his proverbial act together.

Aside from the temptations or the testing that Jesus endured, there are other clues that this time in the wilderness was a time of discernment. First is the timeframe itself—40 days. In the Bible, the number 40, be it days or years, is meant to symbolize a “time between.” This is the necessary span between an important milestone and a gracious conclusion, during which something significant happens. We see this numerous times throughout Scripture. The rain falls for 40 days in the story of Noah and the flood, signaling a new epoch in human history. Moses is on Mount Sinai for 40 days, during which time he receives the Ten Commandments from God. The Israelites are in the wilderness for 40 years, during which time they are prepared for their new identity as God's Chosen People and for their entry into the Promised Land. And following his Resurrection, Jesus appears to his followers for 40 days before his Ascension. Just to name a few key events in salvation history. All of these representing a “time between” in which the people are somehow transformed. A time during which they must discern who and what they are meant to become.

The other significant clue that this is a critical time of discernment and preparation is the fact that during this “time between,” Jesus fasts. In the Bible, fasting is something that people do when they are seeking to become more aware of God's presence. As a means of opening themselves to God and to hearing God's will. Daniel fasted while discerning how to be faithful to God in the face of potential persecution by King Nebuchadnezzar. Esther fasted while discerning how to save her people from the evil Haman. Moses fasted while in the presence of God on Mount Sinai. Saul and Barnabas fasted before being commissioned for ministry was part of their discernment of the nature of their ministry. In each of these cases, fasting was used as a way to open oneself to receive God's guidance, to discern who they were called to be and what they were called to do. How to be faithful to God.

With these Scriptural clues, we see that his temptation in the wilderness was meant to be a time of discernment for Jesus. So what was he intending to discern? Remember that immediately before going into the wilderness, Jesus had been baptized. As he came out of the water, “a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased’” (Lk 3.22). With this revelation, Jesus entered into a “time between.” The time between his baptism and the actual start of his public ministry. Before beginning his public ministry, Jesus must fully embrace his status and mission as Son of God. Jesus, now knowing who he truly is,

needs to figure out just what all of this means. To figure out what it means for him to be the Son of God. To figure out how he is to live into his identity as Son of God.

It is during this time of discernment in which the devil tempts Jesus with various enticements to get him to turn away from who he truly is, to turn away from his identity as Son of God. By offering him bread to ease his physical hunger. By offering him power and authority over all the kingdoms of the world as an incentive to turn away from God and to worship the devil instead. By placing him on the pinnacle of the Temple as a test of God's faithfulness to Jesus.

This time of temptation, of testing, that Jesus endures while discerning the meaning of his newfound identity is ultimately instrumental in confirming and solidifying his identity, is instrumental in helping him to understand his purpose, in discerning his mission and ministry. This time in the wilderness, with its temptations, with Jesus' fasting and discernment, is foundational to who Jesus becomes, to how Jesus lives into his identity as Son of God and as Messiah.

But what happens during those 40 days of fasting in the wilderness is also a model for us in our Lenten journey, and in all times of our lives. Particularly as we, like Jesus, seek to discern the hard questions: who are we as beloved of God and how do we more fully live into that identity? Or, how do we live into who God has created and called us to be?

We may not be tempted with bread or with the allure of power and authority over all nations or with testing God's protection of us as we stand on a pinnacle. But the temptations that we face while seeking to discern who we are created and called to be as beloveds of God are no less significant, no less real, no less life-changing. It is not so much about the specific temptations, but about the types of things that can and do get in the way of being obedient to God's call, to becoming our truest and most authentic self, to become who God has created us to be. The temptations that Jesus faced provide broad categories what cover the gamut of those things or ideas that we also face in discerning our own identities and our relationship with God. Jesus being tempted by hunger is symbolic of the hunger for material possessions, for the accumulation of wealth. Jesus being tempted by glory and authority is symbolic of the thirst for power and authority, of the lure of success and status. Jesus being tested by being placed on the pinnacle of the Temple, while seeming to speak to the issue of safety, which is a valid temptation for many of us, is actually a little more nebulous. But the key lies in the devil's statement, "if you are the Son of God" (Lk 4.9), pointing to the heart of Jesus' own discernment—relationship and identity as the Son of God. Jesus' relationship with God and his identity as Messiah. For us, issues of relationship and identity similarly revolve around us being children of God and what that means to us in our own lives. Any one of these categories, or all of them, can come into play—can become distractions, even deterrents—in our own "time between" as we seek to discern how we are to be faithful to God and his calling.

Thankfully, our Gospel reading not only points out the dangers we may face in our own discernment, it also provides the key to how to navigate our own periods of discernment. For Jesus, the key to how he manages during his time of temptation and to his source of strength in enduring so that he can achieve his goal is the Holy Spirit. We are told that from the beginning, Jesus was "led by the Spirit in the wilderness." Now, for the longest time, I wondered why the

Holy Spirit would lead Jesus into the wilderness. Why would the Holy Spirit put Jesus in a situation of being tempted by the likes of the devil? But that's not what Luke is saying. The Holy Spirit didn't lead Jesus into the wilderness. The Spirit led Jesus in the wilderness. The Holy Spirit led him through the wilderness. Guided him so that he could get through the wilderness, through the temptations, and come out the other side, right to where he needed to be.

We know that the Holy Spirit is a gift from God, provided to humanity at Pentecost, imparted on each and every one of us when we are baptized. The presence of God that is given to each of us, to become a part of who we are, to be a source of comfort and inspiration, to be a guide to us on life's journey. It is particularly during times of testing and temptation that we need the guidance of the Holy Spirit. That we need the assurance of the Holy Spirit that God is with us, even in times that seem dark and devoid of the Divine presence. For even when we don't think we have the strength to go on, we have the strength of God in the form of the Holy Spirit to lift us up, to give us the strength and the courage to stay the course.

The other thing that Jesus relied upon during his time of temptation was the promise of God's faithfulness that is provided in Scripture. The word of God that provides the hope and promise that God is with us, that God is for us, that God is faithful to us. At every turn, Jesus responds to the devil's temptations, to the threats to his identity, with God's holy word:

"It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone'" (v. 4).

"It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him'" (v. 8).

"It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'" (v. 12).

Jesus relies on God's words to guide him and to direct his choices. For he knows his deepest needs—his hunger—is for God above every other hunger or desire he is tempted with. In so doing, he demonstrates that authentic faith—and our authentic calling—is characterized by complete obedience and trust in God's promises. And not by manipulating or attempting to force God to act on his promises on our terms.

You may be thinking, "Jesus was the Son of God. Of course he was able to resist temptation and testing. But what about us mere mortals?" Well, Jesus was also fully human, just as we are. He suffered from the devil's temptations, just as we do. And he stands by us and with us when we are tempted or tested. That is the hope and promise of this Lenten season. That is the hope and promise of the Resurrection that we celebrate at the end of this "time between" that we call Lent. The hope and the promise of the Resurrection is that we are made new. We have a new identity, sharing in the new life that Christ provides for us. And part of that new life is the hope and promise that we do not do not face anything alone. For when we are faithful to God and to the new identity he intends for us, God is faithful to us. Providing us with the strength and the courage that we need to be obedient to him. Providing us with what we need to live into the fullness of what it means to be who we are created and called to be—beloved of God.