

The Meaning of Lent

Matthew 3:13-4:11

March 10, 2019

Res. Reading #707

This morning, I would like to talk with you a little bit about the season in the church which we have just entered, which is, as you probably know, the season of Lent.

Now, Lent is one of those words which we hear in church very often, but which we don't always understand or know very much about, and so I thought I would do a little studying on the origins of Lent, its practice and its meanings.

Come to find out, Lent began in the church during the fourth century after Jesus, and it was named "Lent" because that was the word for Spring in the Anglo language, which is the time of year that it was to be observed. Different churches begin and end their Lenten seasons at different times, but they all fall somewhere in the forty day period just prior to Easter, and the season is intended as a time for reflection and repentance of one's sins in preparation for the coming of the redemption of Easter.

Forty days was set as the duration of Lent for a number of reasons, most importantly because the number forty has great significance in the Bible. For instance, in the Book of Genesis, we read that the Lord caused it to rain for forty days and forty nights during Noah's time. In the Book of Exodus, we read that Moses was on the mountain of God for forty days. And there are a number of incidences in the Bible where the period of forty

days is used, but none more important than in the verse which we have just read, which is the period that Jesus spent alone in the desert.

Now, I use the word alone carefully here, because according to our scripture, Jesus wasn't exactly alone. Just before this period in the desert, Jesus had gone to John, the Baptist, to be baptized by him. Interestingly enough, the Bible tells us in the verses just before the ones which we read this morning, "And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: and lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased."

The last time that a dove was mentioned in the Bible, was when Noah had sent one out from the ark, and it had brought back an olive branch to show that there was once again dry land on the face of the Earth, and then he sent it out again, and it did not return. So, after that, after the destruction of the Earth by water, and the repopulation of the Earth by those who were saved with Noah, and all the things that had happened on the Earth during those thousands of years in-between, the Son of God comes to be baptized by John. And you will remember that John is only months older than Jesus, and his second cousin. And he was sent by God to preach redemption and to get the people ready for Jesus' ministry. So, Jesus comes, and receives his baptism, and when He has received it, there was a voice from Heaven which said, "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased."

And what does Jesus do next? He is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of

the devil. There was a reason why Jesus left and went out into the wilderness. It wasn't an accident that He went out. He didn't just go out there to wander aimlessly for no apparent reason. He didn't go out there to get away from it all. He went there to be tempted by the devil. He went there with that particular reason in mind. And how did he prepare to meet the devil? Did he go to the gym and work out? Did he run to the store and stock up on supplies? Did he gather things up for himself and prepare himself and build himself and his situation up before he took on the devil? I should think He would want to. After all, when we are going up to meet some kind of challenge like that, don't we want to be as prepared as we can be? Don't we want all the help and supplies and weapons in our arsenal that we can possibly gather. Don't we want to be in the best shape that we can be?

Jesus did just the opposite. The Bible says, And "When He had hungered forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred. And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread.

Let me ask you something: when we are up for a big challenge, don't we like to be as prepared as we can be? Why do you suppose that is? Jesus was up for the biggest challenge He had faced until that time. And He got himself in a position where you would think that he was the least prepared that He could be: Why? The answer, beloved, is the great difference between the Son of God and the rest of us. We focus on ourselves. Jesus was focused on God. Let me say that again. WE FOCUS ON OURSELVES. JESUS FOCUSES ON GOD.

Most of the time, don't our minds work around trying to take care of us? I know mine does, much more often than it should. Don't we enter into most situations, viewing things from our own little perspective? That's a pretty narrow view of the world, when you think about it. In the very next verse, the devil is going to come to Jesus and say to Him, "If you are the son of God, command that these stones be made bread." You and I would not want to be in any kind of a weak position if we had to deal with the devil in this way, so we would make sure that we were good and full when this question came around. We wouldn't necessarily know that the devil was going to tempt us in this way, but I am sure that we wouldn't take any chances, and would want to be in as strong a position as possible, so no fasting for us.

When Satan tempted Him, Jesus turned to scripture and said, "It is written, man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeded out of the mouth of God." Jesus didn't focus on how hungry He was, and we can be sure that He was hungry. We would have done that. Jesus focused on the word of God. And the devil, who probably knows what the word of God says as well as any Christian, although he doesn't like it very much, didn't pursue the issue. He had no place else to go with this argument. He had tried to reach Jesus through his human weakness, and found a spiritual strength built up there.

So, the devil tries a different tactic. He takes Jesus up into Jerusalem, and sets him on a pinnacle, high above the city. And the devil says to Him, "If thou be the son of God, cast

thyself down: for it is written, He shall give His angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone.”

Now, the devil is trying to mess with Jesus’ emotions. Remember that Jesus, as the Word, has dwelt with God and has been part of God since the beginning of time. But Jesus in the form of a man, the carpenter’s son from Nazareth, has only just started His ministry. He is a young man, only about thirty years old. This relationship of Christ, God in human form, to God the Father is still new. And the devil is trying to get in between these two entities. He is trying to get Jesus to test God the Father to find out how much He really loves Him.

That would probably get to most of us. We haven’t eaten in forty days. We are hungry, tired, sleeping out in the wilderness, without any comforts of home or any other human contact. Our whole mind, body and spirit are being assaulted by this being who is tempting us to find out just how much our Father in Heaven loves us. I think it’s safe to say that most of us would want to know, after going through all of this. We would like to have some kind of solid assurance that He who sent us to do all this really cares for us. Would that be unreasonable?

Jesus still keeps his eye on God. They may be hungry eyes, they may be tired eyes, they may be lonely eyes, but they are still on God. And he turns to the devil and says, : “It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.”

Well, Satan can’t let things end there. So, he takes Jesus up into an exceedingly high

mountain, and shows Him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; and he says to Jesus, "All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me."

There used to be a television commercial which had a little jingle that said, "Who said you can't have it all?" Well, that is the question that is being put to Jesus right now.

"Who says you cant' have it all, Jesus?" "This is a unique opportunity, one which doesn't come to everyone, only to you." "I will give you everything on this planet, if you will fall down and worship me." "You can have it all, you can leave this desert and all that you have been asked to do, you can leave behind all the heartache and the suffering that you and I both know you are going to have, and live like no king on this Earth has ever lived before. Everything will be absolutely great for you, and all you have to do, as the Son of God, is to fall down and worship me. Come on, what will it hurt?"

Beloved, do you have any idea how important that moment was to you and me? All Jesus had to do was give in, and say yes, and our fate would have been sealed, forever. God had only one plan, and it all rested on the shoulders of one man. When we begin to view religion and faith as this great big entity, this centuries old belief that hundred of millions of people have believed in all this years, and we consider all the churches and cathedrals and books written and studies made and debates argued and all those things, when we consider our faith as evolving around all of these, we are doing nothing more than clouding the issue.

Here is the deal. Here is the real story. One day, the Son of God, exhausted, not just tired, starving, not just hungry, and alone, not just lonely, was taken by the devil to the

top of the world and was offered the whole thing, if He would deny God. And Jesus turned to him and said, "Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve." And the Bible says, Then the devil leaveth him, and behold, angels came and ministered unto him."

What would you and I have done? What have we done on similar occasions when there was much less at stake. Come on, the devil has whispered in your ear, the same as he has whispered in mine. I can't speak for you, but I can tell you that I gave in, often. It could have been something simple, or something really big. It doesn't matter the size of the issue. What matters is that we didn't resist him because we focused on ourselves rather than on God. We have all kinds of words for it. We are deserving, we were entitled, we had righteous indignation, and so on. Do you think Jesus deserved to be in the desert being tempted? Do you think He was entitled to something better? Don't you think he had a right to some righteous indignation? Why were none of those important to Him?

Because He kept His focus on God, and so those other things didn't mean ANYTHING to Him . And in that moment, when Jesus declined the devil's offer and decided to remain true to the calling that God had given Him, you and I moved one step closer to salvation. If Jesus had dropped God's hand that day and picked up Satan's, He would have dropped ours, as well. And we were, strike that, we ARE the main reason why He was here. Jesus Christ was sent here because God loved the world, meaning us. That's the importance of the personal nature of our faith. When the Bible says in the Book of John, "For God so loved the world..." you can update your Bible to read "Me" meaning each

of “Us”.

Somewhere along the line, the church decided to mark these forty days before Easter as a time to commemorate these days in the life of our Savior, when He went into the wilderness and was tempted: when He gave up so many earthly comforts such as food and shelter that we have all come to think we deserve. A lot of people give up things that they like for this season, in recognition of what Jesus gave up. And I guess that’s a good thing to do, to help us to remember all that He gave up for us.

But what is even more important to remember is what He would NOT give up. Jesus would not give up God. And He would not Give up you. No matter what the devil threw at Him, He held on to both of these which were so dear to him. The other things He could do without, but not these. After all this time, He is with God, even at this very moment. And also, even at this very moment, He hasn’t given up on you. And that’s the real meaning of Lent.

Let us Pray.