

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent  
Sermon 3.10.19  
Scripture:

**Luke 4:1-13**

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness,<sup>2</sup> where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.<sup>3</sup> The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."<sup>4</sup> Jesus answered him, "It is written, "One does not live by bread alone.' "<sup>5</sup> Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.<sup>6</sup> And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please.<sup>7</sup> If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."<sup>8</sup> Jesus answered him, "It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.' "<sup>9</sup> Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here,<sup>10</sup> for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,<sup>11</sup> and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.' "<sup>12</sup> Jesus answered him, "It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' "<sup>13</sup> When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

With this story every year we begin Lent. Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is remembered in all three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. So it makes for easy inclusion in all three years of the lectionary calendar, Years A, B, and C. It also sets out perfectly the forty-day project that is Lent, the forty days (not counting Sundays) that guide us to Easter—maybe a little too perfectly.

It's long been accepted that during Lent the best practice is to "give something up." Choose the thing that tempts you most in the world—chocolate, beer, binge-watching TV, or in my case chocolate beer and binge-watching TV—and give that up. Resist that temptation just as Jesus resisted temptation in the wilderness. *Imitatio Christi*, right? We could hardly do better as those who seek to be as Christ in the world than to imitate him, right down to imitating his resisting temptation.

The problem with that is that this story is uniquely about who Jesus is, uniquely about the temptation he underwent and why. Really, it has very little to say about any of us or even to any of us, very little implication as to how we ought to live or behave.

Or so I read in commentaries this week.

Too bad because this can make for awkward preaching—a sort of "show and tell" more than a "try it yourselves!" We're about to head off into the land of theology, into the more specific

neighborhood of Christology, a place where we might find ourselves ever wondering, “So what?” And with any luck, and against some odds, we’ll move past this persistent preacherly question, “So what?” to some semblance of an answer: “So, this...”

But first: Michael Jackson. Weird segue, I know. What I don’t know is how many among us feel in a tailspin about the recent claims made against him for sexual abuse. A documentary dropped this past week which focuses on two men who fell into Michael Jackson’s orbit in the 90s when they were boys and when Jackson was at the height of his fame and power. They each maintain they were groomed from the start for abuse, the earlier one more gradually, the later one with an efficiency that suggests Jackson had grown in skill and intention. Both sons of single mothers, in one case that mother a widow; both young fans of Michael Jackson, each for whom Jackson’s professed exclusive affection was (naturally!) a powerful force: they were each the sort a predator can apparently easily spot.

As for me, as someone whose life maps perfectly to Jackson’s musical output—as someone who was fond of the Jackson Five when I was young, was spellbound by *Thriller*, the song, the music video, and much of the album when I was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and who could appreciate Jackson’s influence on all of pop music since then—I guess I intend to see the documentary, though, if what commentary I’ve heard about it is true, I shouldn’t look forward to it. Apparently, the two men are each credible witnesses, and each has a harrowing story to tell about the abuse, their acceptance of it as if under a spell, and their coming clear about it all when each separately became a father to a son, a situation that provoked in each a desperate need and desire to protect what in them was never protected. This becoming a father to a son broke the spell of power and fame that had been so completely cast it captured the boys and their mothers, along with the larger culture that has long taken a bifocal view of Jackson—as I have.

What captures my attention about it now is the warping effect that power had on those lives, the distorting effect that power born of fame had on those psyches, those relationships of mother-and-son, and those in Jackson’s employ who were aiding and abetting a terrible crime. What captures my attention about it now is how power can indeed capture.

It’s of a piece with the closing testimony Michael Cohen offered about his purported coming clear following years of being under the spell of the Trump Organization. I should say, I believe his testimony about that, and I realize maybe I’m a fool to do so. But it squares with reality

as I've seen it, if not truly experienced it—that power can capture people to do its bidding, capture people not only as craven as Michael Cohen seems long to have been, but also people as ordinarily credulous and overwhelmed as the two mothers of those two now grown sons who apparently live in terrible regret.

The temptation Jesus faced in the wilderness is the temptation to exercise power in such a way as might capture. “Since you’re the Son of God,” the devil said to Jesus—the devil, which is to say the *diabolos* or the divider. “Since you’re the Son of God, command these stones to become a loaf bread.”

The power to do this would, of course, relieve Jesus of his forty-day famishing. It would also give him unprecedented power over the masses—for, as every dictator knows, if you give the people bread, people who would otherwise hunger, you’ve got them. You’ve got them at least figuratively eating out of the palm of your hand, and maybe even literally eating out of the palm of your hand, which would be quite a charge—people, like dogs, licking the crumbs out of your palms.

But Jesus resisted the temptation by avoiding the implication—the implication that bread is a means to ultimate power, though it is. He took the whole thing literally instead. “Man doesn’t live by bread alone.” But this was sly beyond the simplistic understanding suggests, for by this Jesus implied that, though the power to control the most basic food supply would be great, it would yet be too limited for what he was about in life—for what he was about in life wasn’t simply survival (certainly not for himself, but also not for the people whom he came to serve and save) but was freedom, fulfillment, power for the people, *all* the people, each of the people, each of us.

When this temptation failed, the divider grew even more obvious. If bread as a means for domination was beyond what this Christ could grasp, then the divider would be more on the nose about it all. Showing Jesus in one instant all the kingdoms of the world, he said, “To you I will give all their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I will give it to anyone I please. If you, then, but worship me, it will all be yours.”

We might wonder how “all this” had been given over to him—all the kingdoms of the world, all the power structures operable on the power of this tempter. But, then, given just a little bit of wonder, and maybe (I’ll admit it) a measure of cynicism, the evidence for this abounds—that hardly a society exists wherein “divide and conquer” isn’t a proven power-move, that hardly a civilization has arisen and sustained itself without the mechanism of scapegoating, creating

outcasts and then casting them out, hard at work. With a nod of recognition that some “kingdoms” are more good than others—more life-giving, more just, more merciful, more fair—I’ll admit I think it’s also clearly the case that none reign without something devilish going on.

Plus, there’s the obvious fact that were Jesus to submit to worshipping anything other than God, then he would no longer be the Christ.

So, Jesus answered him, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”

The third temptation was more like the first, a demand for the sort of show that would capture the hearts of the people for its spectacular capacity to defy the laws of nature to which all us mere mortals are accountable. “Since you’re the Son of God, throw yourself down from this highest point of the Temple, for God will command his angels to protect you.”

But again, this wouldn’t be as Christ would do—this means that heroes of current popular imagination might resort to, if not to save themselves then at least to save, say, a damsel in distress or a kitten in a tree. “C’mon, Jesus. Show us you can play the hero. Give us a show and a hero. Inspire the people!” But, no, no, the way Christ would win devotion to the gospel was, and is, by the appeal of love—love without condition or coercion, love without bargaining or transaction, love without spectacle and spell-casting, but love freely offered to be freely received so then to be freely offered until love abounds.

See, this story is all about who Jesus would be in the world, and who he would *not* be; how he would fulfill his begottenness as the Christ, and all the ways that he might otherwise betray that begottenness as the beloved anointed one of God. See, it has little to say about us—about how we should be, how we should behave.

Except...

I’ve never been one to be much swayed by the power of someone else’s personality—but maybe it’s because I’ve never been exposed to someone of real power, of overpowering charisma. I’ve never known a Michael Jackson or a Donald Trump. What’s more I’ve never been a part of a hierarchical system that might produce its equivalent, and now I realize I avoid those systems. Raised even in the congregational church, where the pastor, that point of power, is only there by virtue of a consenting people who are all right there in the room and can remove their consent at any time, I feel almost allergic to such power dynamics as decide upon *one*.

There was one time, though—and it will be hard to describe. It was a week-long, sleep-away conference where I'd been reduced by circumstances to deep insecurity and vulnerability, and after several days of struggle one of the conference moderators, who'd otherwise sat quietly as an observer and a resource, recognized my struggle. "You're doing really hard work," he said to me, a simple and not overdone comment. But it had me for a moment feeling as if I'd do anything for him. I had this flash of submission that almost brought me to my knees, and it was *frightening*.

I hope never to feel that again—and I know, in Christ, I never need to, I need in fact not to, that to feel that is actually a warning, a *warning* that fast is developing an "opportune time," this which the Gospel of Luke, starting with the temptation of Jesus, claims is the very thing the "devil" is willing to wait for, is indeed watching for—an opportune time.

And now we've come to it—and I'm as surprised as anyone. Now we've come to where the "so what" of the sermon becomes the "so, this..." We've come to where *imitatio Christi* is asked of us each and all. (Does it unnerve you that I'm always as surprised to arrive here as anyone? Some preachers start out the writing of their sermon knowing exactly where it will end up. I almost never do. Does it unnerve you that this journey, which we always go on together, has me as wandering as any of you, as searching as leading?) But here we are, safely arrived once again—safe, though this is where the real challenge begins.

We will each, over the course of time, find ourselves with power to exercise, and in some cases even power *over* someone else. It likely won't be tremendous power; it likely won't be widespread power. But we will each, I think doubtless, find ourselves working in relation to someone vulnerable to us, and perhaps even deeply vulnerable to us for their being vulnerable in the world. I think of Susan's work with her young choreographers. I think of the working community of Gould Farm. I think of my volunteering at the prison. I think of any who raise children or teach children. Given these circumstances, we'll need to decide how we'll enjoy and exercise that power—whether for the sake of empowering the other or for the sake of manipulating the other so to orchestrate a furtherance of our own power.

Having been in those circumstances myself, I can testify that this does indeed present a real temptation. Do I want to crush this person, squash him like a bug? Do I want to get this person to submit to me as if he or she were one of my dogs? Do I seek to be worshipped, or am I going to be about something else, something that resembles Christ, something that might be called love?

Tobias once said to me as he was reflecting on his life as a student and the many teachers he's worked with, and the many more he yet will, that there are those who are good people but not very good teachers, there are those who are lousy people but can put together a good curriculum whose content he can learn, and then there are those who are good people *and* good teachers, from whom you can learn the content of the given subject matter while also learning what sort of person it's best to be in the world.

As soon as I realized he was able to tell such things, I realized I needed to step up my game—which might actually be the best Lenten discipline of all. To look to the pioneer and perfecter of our faith so to figure out in any given moment how to be as regards the other: this might be a very good way to spend these forty days. I've given up alcohol, too, creeping into my life as it had been, becoming a little too frequent and regular a factor. But better still is this *imitatio Christi*, this imitation of Christ that would present each moment in time as an opportune time for either something devilish to play out or for something beloved of God to play out—each moment an opportune time for love freely offered to be freely received.

Once you start watching and waiting for such opportunities, you see them all over the place. Once you've got your eye out for such a chance to act in love, you notice they're everywhere, all the time as an opportune time for the playing out of the power of love—like even right now, right here in this room.

Thanks be to God.