

The Rev. Ryan Fischer  
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw  
First Sunday in Lent  
March 6, 2022

Lectionary Year C: Luke 4:1-13

The liturgical year of the church makes us very conscious of the movement of time. We break up our seasons into Sundays and then individual days of the week after that. We notice, in particular, that Lent is spoken of as a period of forty days, and now, in this season of Lent, we use these days for penitence and fasting in preparation for the festival of our Lord's resurrection at Easter.

But, if you were to sit down and count the number of days, for example, between Ash Wednesday and the Saturday before Easter, you would count forty-six days in all. So, is Lent longer than forty days? Technically, no...because Sundays are counted separately as "Sundays in Lent" and not "Sundays of Lent." The Lord's Day is al-  
ways a day of resurrection and, therefore, stands apart from the rest of the days of the week.

There is a popular perception that, because Sunday is a day of resurrection, none of our Lenten fasts need to be observed on Sundays. I'm generally not a stickler for adherence to these kinds of rules, but even I think this takes things a bit too far!

We count the days of Lent to number forty most obviously as a recollection of the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness being tested. In the numerology of the Bible, the number forty is recurring -- for example, the flood in Genesis was caused by rain that lasted forty days and forty nights, and the Israelites wan-

dered for forty years in the wilderness before reaching the Promised Land. To the best of our knowledge, in the ancient world, forty was simply a large, approximate number, roughly equivalent to "umpteenth" or "bazillion" today.

When the number forty appears in the Bible, it denotes trial or testing; thus, all of the associations we would remember of the number forty are with uncertainty, pain, and sacrifice. The pre-eminent example of this -- today, at least -- appears in our Gospel text. As the Gospel of Luke unfolds, Jesus, between his baptism and the beginning of his public ministry, is led into the wilderness for a time of testing that lasts (guess what?) forty days.

Of course, this time of testing serves, in part, to prove a point -- that the One who emerges from this not having given in to temptation is the Son of God, the Messiah. Because of what he was able to do, we can be assured that he is who he says he is. But we should be surprised, perhaps, at what he doesn't do. In Luke, chapter 4, the devil tempts Jesus to do things that, as the Son of God, he should be able to do. We know that, throughout the Gospels, Jesus performs miracles, so we shouldn't be surprised that the devil tempts Jesus to miraculously transform a stone into bread (Luke 4:3). The devil tempts this hungry person to, in effect, make himself something to eat. And yes, Jesus got hungry because he was fully human in addition to being fully divine. But Jesus could've turned that stone into bread, and he didn't.

The devil tried again, and showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. He told 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" (Luke 4:6). Remember that power and glory were things that Jesus was extremely careful with throughout his earthly existence. Yes, today we proclaim him King of Kings and Lord of Lords, but this is only after his death and resurrection. God exalted him to that, but he did not exalt himself. One can only imagine how tempting power would be in one's weaker moments. But Jesus had a way of making weakness work for him; it empowered the powerless and gave hope to the poor. Yes, he could've had all the power he wanted right there, and he declined.

The devil tried a third time, and promised Jesus invincibility (Luke 6:9). But, for Jesus, invincibility would miss the point of being fully divine and yet fully human. As it turned out, Jesus was supposed to live a real life and die a real death, and, like his kingship, his "invincibility" would come only after his resurrection from the dead and ascension to the right hand of the Father. But this temptation is particularly noteworthy insofar as we find the devil quoting Scripture -- Psalm 91, verses 11 and 12, to be exact. One can ascribe this only to a devilish cynicism that seeks to exploit or take advantage of a person in a weakened position. If you're a fan of the 1987 film Wall Street, imagine Gordon Gekko looking you straight in the eye and saying, "I care about you." Yuck!

In this case, the devil offered Jesus a shortcut to immortality; he could've bypassed that cross and suffering, but didn't.

The devil tempted the hungry man with food, the weak man with pow-

er, and the (seemingly) mortal man with immortality.

And the devil failed.

It's a real test to be in the wilderness...not to mention for forty days. It kind of makes our forty days of Lent seem inconsequential, doesn't it? We're not in a real wilderness without food and without the conveniences and amenities of life. But surely we have some places and events in our lives that are wilderness-like, with all the accompanying trials and tests. A personal tragedy could cause you to feel alone and to test your faith in God. That would surely be a wilderness experience. Depression or anxiety could keep you away from people who could help you, and lead you to unhealthy ways of coping. From personal experience, I can tell you that there's a vast wilderness there! Or maybe the wilderness is more literal, and you really are all by yourself someplace and don't have much contact with other people. This was a terribly concerning reality during the pandemic. Being a hermit is definitely only for those truly called to that, as in-person social connection is essential to our well-being. That is one wilderness I hope we never have to live in again!

But Lent still puts us in a wilderness so that we can discover what -- apart from God -- has a hold of us. You probably won't hear me speak much publicly about my journey of recovery, but a little bit today seems rather fitting. In case you're wondering, I'm on Day Fifty-Four without a drink. I can't say that it's all been perfectly hunky-dory, but I know there are places I can go and people I can talk to, which will make it less likely for me to pick up a

bottle. I know, too, that I am surrounded by the prayers and support of so many of you here, and this offers an assurance to me that is beyond words...other than to say that it is a vital ingredient of my recovery. Someday, I hope to be to the point where I'll have to give up something besides drinking to really make it feel like a Lenten fast!

And if Lenten fasts serve as a way for you to better identify the things that control you, may you discover that, because of Jesus, they don't control you. Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, but he did not succumb to temptation. He won that battle in the wilderness just like he won the battle over sin and death in the cross and resurrection. Jesus has shown you a better way -- that you, like him, can win battles over temptation by virtue of his inspiring example and witness, and, most importantly, by the eradication of sin that is promised through his passion and death. Does this mean that you will ever after be perfect? No! But you'll at least know a better way...

As we see Jesus emerge from the wilderness not having succumbed to temptation, may we emerge from our wildernesses in like manner. By him and through him we are given the wisdom and courage to face temptation and defeat it. If even a fraction of what God did in Jesus Christ can be what Jesus does in us, sin, death, and the devil will not overpower us...not in forty days, not in forty years, not in the end of time. Let us put our trust in a God who can work such wonders, and ever after dwell in the wonder of his grace that saves us from all that the devil puts in our way. God will surely

prevail in and through us.

Amen.