

It is the beginning of Lent, which means that you and I need to be reminded of an enduring truth that one of my favorite seminary professors once said to us, and that the season of Lent offers us:
You are more messed up than you think you are. And you are more loved than you think you are.

So let me explain. In Lent we spend 40 days to prepare for Easter and we commemorate Jesus' 40 days of fasting and praying in the wilderness in preparation for his earthly ministry. Lent is often a time to give up something, or as I often recommend, to take up something, some new discipline or habit that will deepen our spiritual lives and connect us more deeply with God. In doing so, most of us discover it's much harder than we expected, especially when we give up something that is a real sacrifice of any kind. It's often a difficult realization about our frailty as humans. As one person joked, "Lent is a time I determine which addictions I still have some control over." A lot of my friends give up Facebook for Lent. Others of us just pray for certain friends to give up Facebook for Lent. Either way, the issue of temptation comes into greater focus for us during Lent, and we often get a glimpse of our failings in a new way— but we also get a glimpse of the love of God that covers us in a new way. And it all begins with the story we just heard of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness.

I have read and preached on this story many times and over the years I have come to believe that Jesus' temptations are not described in order to show Jesus as some kind of hero to us – they are described in order to show us Jesus' full humanity – to demonstrate that these temptations are common to us all as humans. Jesus was tempted in every way as we are. And you and I struggle mightily with the very temptations that Satan poses to Jesus because they touch on core aspects of the human struggle, in other words, these are archetypal temptations. Notice too that Jesus' temptation story is juxtaposed with the story of the temptation of Adam & Eve in our first lesson. The choice is clear: we can either model our response to temptation after Adam & Eve or after Jesus. Adam & Eve's response is to engage in conversation with Satan – as if it were a perfectly reasonable consideration to dabble in a bit of evil doing in a "let's see if this makes sense" approach. And once that conversation begins, doubt settles in— maybe it isn't really all that bad...perhaps I just

misunderstood God's purpose or intention; it sure is enticing. Eve takes the bait and bites. And once temptation has been given into, others are brought in to share in it – Eve invites Adam to take a bite. Evil wins this time. And then instead of repenting, Adam does what we humans so often do – he blames someone else. "That woman made me do it."

The other pattern given to us when confronted with temptation is that of Jesus' response in the desert. Notice that Jesus does not engage in conversation with the devil but simply rebukes each temptation in turn by the power of the Spirit. And I would like to suggest that each of the three temptations in this story represent two different types of temptation: 1. To believe something false about who God is and what God is like 2. To give in to a desire common to humans that ultimately thwarts the will of God in our lives. The temptations are twofold.

Let's unpack these. The first temptation is to turn all the stones into bread. This temptation may include the physical temptations that we all struggle with— everything from substance abuse to food addiction, but at a deeper level this temptation really beckons us to take control, to take matters into our own hands, rather than leave them in God's. The false god being offered here is the god that cannot be trusted – a God who will not care for us or provide for us in the ways we most deeply need— and so we'll have to do it ourselves. I know I struggle with this one a lot – and I think we are all confronted with this temptation, especially when facing scarcity or loss. It is the temptation to believe that there is not enough to go around in God's abundance— it inhibits our ability to be generous, to wait patiently, and to open our hearts to others. We cannot welcome the stranger because they may take from us. We cannot trust in Jesus' vision of God's Kingdom where the last shall be first and the first shall be last – we are too caught up in a "me first" mentality. We then, must be our own saviors and we must turn the stones into bread to quench our hungers and meet our needs: we don't wait on God's timing or seek God's way. (Notice that God does provide for Jesus following this event by sending angels to him.)

The second temptation is for Jesus to throw himself down off the pinnacle of the temple in order to test God to come and save him. This temptation is one that invites us to create God in our own image – to

create a god who will agree with us and do our bidding, rather than the other way around. The false god being offered here is simply the one that we make for ourselves....it is the exchange of the true God for an idol. With this false god we can take the Bible and twist and interpret it in whatever way benefits us, just as Satan does in this passage when he quotes Scripture. We can pick and choose which Scriptures to apply and when, and we can then justify the behavior and actions that benefit us and condemn those that disagree with us. In college during a History of Religion course we were required to argue both for and against slavery using the Bible. I assure you it can be done, and it can be done on almost any issue if we do not do as Jesus did and interpret Scripture relying on the power of the Holy Spirit. We will have a very hard time understanding the Bible or discovering the Truth (capital T) without guidance by the Spirit. Those who claim to have the truth but use it for their own ends without the Spirit's leading have simply created a false god. It is at this point that lies become truth and truth becomes lies... and soon confusion reigns as our many false gods and false truths compete for prominence. When struggling with this temptation we do well to be reminded of author Ann Lamott's words, "You can safely assume that you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do." The point being, make sure our agenda is in line with God's agenda, and not the other way around. A best practice on this front is to continually utter the words of the Lord's prayer: "Thy will be done, Thy Kingdom come" and "Not my will, but thine."

The third temptation is the promise to receive all the Kingdoms of the world by bowing down to the devil. This temptation is really the temptation of the ego – the temptation to place our ego over and above others, even above God. The false god being offered here is the one that is not worthy of our full worship and self-offering – this god is too small and too insignificant and it is a god we don't really believe will fulfill the promise of Ephesians 3, a God "who through his mighty power at work within us can accomplish infinitely more than we can ask or imagine." The temptation here is to put ourselves before others with the false sense of self-importance. We are driven to do what we do, not because it is God's will but because it makes us look good. Motivation is key in this temptation. We clamor to

possess more and more. We want the prestige and power. We need to be admired. What people think of us becomes more important than what God thinks of us. Soon we cannot admit our wrongdoing. You have probably met someone who has totally given into this temptation some point – they are always right, they won't back down or apologize, and they are completely insufferable to deal with. Giving in to this temptation of the ego completely inhibits our ability to embrace humility and it is the exact opposite of Jesus' call to take up our cross and to lay down our lives for the sake of love of others.

These are the false gods being offered to us continually: the god that is not trustworthy, the god that is made in our own image, and the god that is unworthy. None of these are the true God but these temptations befall all of us as humans. Yet Jesus shows us the way out by refusing to engage evil, by combatting each temptation with God's Word by the leading of the Holy Spirit.

It is Lent. You can do this. If you're trying to follow Jesus at all, expect to be tempted. And if you do give in, know that this is exactly why Jesus came into the world and died. Because God's love for you knows no bounds. It doesn't matter what you've done or what you might do. Every saint has a past and every sinner a future. Get back up, start over, face those temptations once again, and with God's help keep up the good fight. Nothing you do can ever separate you from the love of God. You are loved. You are loved. You are loved more than you think you are. Amen.