

Lent 1

In this season we are invited to observe a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word. We are reminded of our need to study scripture and be fed by Christ's body and blood. We need to offer prayers. And it is through these that we are nourished and filled with God's Holy Spirit.

This is what girds us so that we are better able to withstand temptation, to say no to the evil one. It is through prayer and being nourished by Christ's body and blood that we are fed and encouraged to listen for Jesus Christ's voice. It is through sitting with God's holy words, the meditating and wrestling with the teachings, that we discern the difference between the Holy Spirit's voice and the evil one's.

This is a life-long endeavor. We haven't, as a book title says, 'learned everything we need to know in kindergarten.' How do we begin to know what God is calling us to be and to do, if we don't read God's love letter to us?

If you have ever received a much waited for love letter, I bet you didn't just read it once and set it aside. I suspect it was read over and over, letting the words seep into your very being. God's love letter to us is no different.

It is only by prayer and engaging God's word over and over that we will know the path we are to walk. And in being fed through this faith community, and the body and blood of his son, we are nourished to stay the course, to continue the journey. It is by doing these things we will be stronger when facing temptation.

Temptation is just that ... tempting. Everyone is tempted at various times to turn away from the ways of God. Listen again to the opening lines from our Gospel today. Jesus, having just been baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit, goes into the wilderness, and lives without food for forty days during which he was tempted by the devil. And at the end, he was tempted not just once but three times in very specific ways.

First, turn stones to bread. Second, Jesus was to accept the devil's generous gift of all the kingdoms of the world with the one condition – worship me, the devil. Finally, throw yourself down from the mountain to prove God's angels will protect you. To each of these temptations Jesus cites the Word of God.

Satan, the evil one, is sly, cunning, and seductive. If Satan were a mean bully, there would be little temptation to embrace him. If Satan offers something desirable against something not desirable, there would be little temptation for us.

Instead, the evil one knows our weaknesses and exploits them. So, in a trite example if Satan tempts me with sauerkraut there would be no temptation. But let Satan tempt me with my favorite dried apricots, that is a different story. The evil one offers what appeals to our inner desires.

Being committed to living our lives in this world in faithfulness to the way of God does not exempt us from the wilderness. It does not exempt us from temptation. It does not exempt us from the struggle.

If Jesus, the Son of God, was tempted, then who among us can be exempt? We can only go into temptation filled with the Holy Spirit, girded with scripture, and nourished through prayer and being fed by Christ's body and blood.

I must pause here to say that we need to give the evil one its due. The timing is perfect. Jesus is alone, tired, hungry, and exhausted from his struggles over the past forty days. And now the devil engages Jesus in conversation, a conversation about what it means to be about God's business in the world.

The first temptation is not only personal but social: Will Jesus' ministry be one of turning stones into bread? The second is political: Will Jesus submit to Satan so that Jesus will rule the world in order to achieve good for the people of this world? The third is religious: Will Jesus prove God's power through avoiding death on the cross by the display of supernatural power?

It is important to keep in mind that these temptations aren't between something good and something that is evil in and of itself. These temptations beckoned Jesus to do something which could bring about good in this world.

Stones to bread, the hungry in the world would no longer be hungry. If Jesus had taken political control, the oppressed would have benefited greatly. Proving God to the world, how many more would have believed.

What is important in these temptations is that Jesus recognized who was tempting him. Jesus knew that he would not be following God but the evil one.

For us today temptation remains real. At times we are being tempted by the evil one with opportunities that could be used to feed the poor or have power in the world to bring about social justice. What we can miss is the asterisk, like in so many advertisements today, that tells us there are important restrictions or conditions that are in tiny print.

The asterisk for the evil one's offers of gifts is we will have to worship the evil one, we will have to follow the evil one. We will be selling our soul, little by little only to find ourselves going blindly on our way, waking up down the road following the wrong path, following the wrong leader. In temptation we are being called to forget who we belong to.

The evil one calls us to be dazzled by the riches of our world. The evil one calls us to a life of success as the world defines success without regard to being faithful to God or all that God has created. The evil one attempts to seduce with soft whispers, lulling words, and gentle nudging.

I wish it were easy to discern the evil one from God. I wish it were easy to resist the devil. But the evil one whispers ... you will be able to do more for others. Whispers ... no one will know... it won't hurt ... it won't make any difference... it will make your life better and easier, and you deserve a better, easier life ... And whenever we listen and follow, we have again sold out to the evil one.

Temptation by the evil one is all around us. Temptation by the evil one is within us. The challenge is to recognize the evil one and then to reject the devil and all the gifts and the temptations being offered.

We need only look to Jesus Christ to see how we are to respond to temptation. Jesus recognized he was being tempted and girded himself in prayer. Jesus recognized the one who was tempting him. Jesus recognized the gifts and opportunities being offered for what they truly were ... temptations to draw him away from God. Jesus knew who he belonged to, he knew God's voice. God's words were written in his heart and in his mind, so he could reject the temptation.

In this time of Lent, as we recommit ourselves to Jesus Christ, I invite you to a time of reflection. To read scripture, to sit in prayer, and to be nourished by Christ's body and blood so you might discover not only what is tempting you but the path the Spirit is calling you to walk so that you might discover God embracing you with abundant love and joy.