

Year A Lent 1 Leading By Example Matthew 4 vv1 to 11

Still dripping wet from his baptism in the Jordan River, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness. Jesus has been ordained by God at the river but his ministry has not yet started. We don't know what kind of a leader he will be. We don't yet know what he will do or say...and neither does Jesus. He is spending 40 days and 40 nights finding out what his ministry will look like, what he will do, what he will say, how he will lead. He does this by spending time with God.

Although the devil takes a leading role in this story and demands our attention, we know that Jesus first spent a lot of time with God. We know this because we are told Jesus fasted – for 40 days and 40 nights Jesus did not indulge in regular eating habits. Fasting is an ancient pathway to closeness with God. In fasting, we turn our attention away from our physical needs to our spiritual needs. We turn in prayer to God to help us through the difficulty, to ease our burden, and simply to be in the presence of God. Instead of the extreme crankiness and irritability caused by hunger, we know the joy and warmth of God's presence. Spending so much of our time in God's presence serves to strengthen and deepen our relationship with God. We bathe in God's love and we learn what God wants us to be and to do in fulfillment of God's ultimate purpose of total reconciliation among all things. This is precisely what Jesus was doing in the wilderness for those 40 days and nights.

At the end of this time, when you may think Jesus is weak from hunger and loneliness, we are shown, instead, the strength of will and the clarity of purpose that comes from deep relationship with God. For at the end of the fast, the devil enters the scene to tempt Jesus into giving up that relationship with God...and

Jesus triumphs. Empowered by the Spirit, he faces the devil and remains faithful to God.

In a world of untrustworthy leaders – then and now – Jesus shows us the trustworthy leader he will be. In his recounting of this story of the temptation, Matthew helps us out by pointing to the qualities we can look for in a trustworthy leader. The trustworthy leader – and we need leaders in our journey – will guide us into the values and practices compatible with life in the fully realized reign of God on earth whereas those we should *not* follow are the ones exhibiting the values and practices of the broken world around us.

We not only need the right kind of leader, we also need to *be* the right sort of leader for the world – individually and together as the Church we need to know what typical temptations we will face as well as how to respond to them – what values and practices help us survive the brokenness, help us live the life of God’s kingdom? Both are shown to us today – the temptations and the response. We often know which choice to make in order to live according to life in God’s kingdom but the world does not make it easy for us to choose that way. The comfort and stability of living according to the world’s way of life is tempting – it makes life easier since that *is* the way the world operates. Going against the grain is tough. But, the world’s way is the way to self-destruction. We see this on a grand scale in the wars and conflicts raging around the world; by the poverty and homelessness generated by inequalities and injustices in a world fuelled by “want”. We see it in the disturbing rise in mental health concerns like stress, depression, and anxiety. On a personal level, each one of us is constantly inundated by marketing messages of need and want and deserve that revolve

around personal comfort and luxury rather than on spiritual wellness and wholeness. You need look no further than the astronomical number of ads for betting sites, gambling and casino sites, investing commercials, and the digital marketing during hockey games that tell us we deserve everything – we even deserve pizza. Marketing no longer revolves around the quality of the product but on the fact that you deserve the product. And you need money – lots of money – to surround yourself with all of these products that you deserve. “Dream big” the lottery commercials tell us. Don’t be satisfied with a simple beach vacation when it can be your privately owned beach with pizza air-lifted in by drones.

It is tough to go against all of this. Many don’t want to or don’t realize that they should. Jesus shows us today the path toward life, toward an end to the greed and the stress and the multitude of problems these cause in our personal lives, in our communities, and on the world stage. To each of the devil’s three temptations, Jesus answers with a quotation from Deuteronomy. This book was written during a time of great suffering and loss for the Israelites. Many had been brutally murdered, many others carted off to a foreign land as prisoners, and their homes and temple had been destroyed by the invaders. The editors of Deuteronomy were writing a warning for the present and the future – the suffering was brought about by their own thoughts and actions. They had turned from God to living the way the world plays the game...more is better...power means a better position in society, more property, a padded pocketbook. Jesus shows us the opposite.

To a hungry Jesus, the devil says, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." Jesus answers, "It is written, 'One does not

live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" It would be much too simplistic to think that this is just a warning against choosing the material, physical world, and its values (represented by bread) over the spiritual, nonphysical world and its values (represented by the word of God). Everyone needs material things to survive. Jesus, in fact, teaches us to pray for bread: "Give us this day our daily bread." It is *where* we turn for our material needs that is important. Do we turn to God or to the idolatry of the world? God encourages us to rely on God for our needs and to share our abundance with others. The world encourages us to constantly want more than we actually need – drawers full of socks, dresser tops arranged with perfumes and other pretty things, closets just for shoes, and so on – and the world encourages us to give away what we no longer want, or to purchase a can of soup for the food bank while our grocery cart is brimming with stuff for *our* cupboards. And the world tells us to feel good about this behaviour.

"All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:44-45). Do we do this? No. Can we? This is the counter-cultural way of living toward which we strive. In doing so, we hasten the kingdom as Peter tells us, when no one is left behind and all people have enough. Working toward this, cultivating lives of generous abundance, sharing what we have, is what we do because, as Jesus tells us in his answer to the devil: God will provide. We work against the fear generated by the devil, by the world around us – the fear that we won't have enough for ourselves if we give too much away. This is why the body of Christ will survive as a community working together. The one who has two

coats can give one away, Jesus says. We mustn't be afraid of giving away too much – money or time or labour – together we are more than we are alone.

In the devil's first temptation to turn the stones into bread, we also see the temptation to abuse power. There is the saying that power corrupts. Power places temptation in front of us because the way in which we use our power is always a choice. Jesus absolutely could have turned those stones into bread but shows us that the way to use power is to use it to reveal God's kingdom. Each time we see Jesus using the power of God throughout the Gospels, he is using it to show us the generosity and love of God and of God's kingdom – healing the sick, welcoming the outcast, feeding the hungry – because in God's kingdom these needs no longer exist. Each one of us has power, each one of us has gifts to use. How we use them is our choice. The question is always before us: Am I using my power and my gifts to reveal God's kingdom or am I hiding the light of God's kingdom in the darkness of the ways of the world?

The devil's second temptation continues the abuse of power train of thought. At the very top of the towering Temple in Jerusalem, the devil says to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answers, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Again, I emphasize, Jesus uses the power given to him to reveal the kingdom of God to the world not in self-serving arbitrary acts like getting the angels to catch him. We are not to engage in self-serving demonstrations of God's power. Television evangelists and huge mega-churches that very loudly and publicly, with a lot of glitz and glamour, heal people

at the altar comes to mind. I do not doubt God's ability to heal. We do not need to make a public spectacle of it, raking in money that unfortunately, we too frequently hear in the news is being misused for personal gain. Power corrupts. Church leaders are not immune to the lures of the world. Choice is placed before everyone.

In each of these first two temptations, the devil begins with the same words: "If you are the Son of God." The implication is clear. The Son of God should be more and better than the rest of us. The Son of God should wield power, take control, be wealthy, free from suffering. Embracing his identity in this way is a temptation in itself for Jesus. Thinking of the Son of God in these terms though – in terms of might, wealth, easy living – is the way the world thinks. On Good Friday we are going to hear these words again: "If you are the Son of God, come down off that cross. Save yourself and save us!" How tempting it must have been for Jesus to end the agony, to come down off that cross. But he did not. True power is selfless. Jesus, even on the cross, uses his power to reveal God's kingdom...a kingdom of selfless love, abundant generosity and love for all creation.

"The Roman Empire is in the background of the third temptation. The devil offers Jesus the leadership of a world whose social structure is a rigid social pyramid with the privileged controlling the resources while repressing the many people in the middle and at the bottom of the pyramid. Rome, like other empires, created idols in its own images to justify its controlling social power" (Ronald J. Allen at workingpreacher.org). Jesus' answer to the lure of the splendour and power of the world – his, if he will worship the devil – his answer to this is, "Worship God." It may not be the Roman Empire outside our window but it is most certainly

“empire”. Consumerism and competition rules our world with devastating, destructive results...war, oppression, poverty, crime, and so on. Most suburban malls are deliberately modeled after traditional worship spaces – high ceilings, marble floors, sunlight streaming in...the mall changes its colours and décor seasonally just as churches do but, in the mall, we are called not to worship of God but, rather, we are called to desire and adore all of the many products on display, painting a picture for us of what our “good life” should be.

Jesus leads us today on the path toward the true “good life” – it is a life with God in God’s kingdom. But it is not the easiest path when lure of power and luxury and self-indulgence is so strong around us. Jesus resists the notion that he deserves better: If you are the Son of God shouldn’t you be rich and healthy and have every whim filled? We hear those voices too: If you are a child of God, shouldn’t your life be a little smoother, a little easier? Shouldn’t you be happier, richer, healthier, safe? If you are a church of God, shouldn’t your pews be packed with people and shouldn’t you have money up to your eyeballs? This, as I’ve said before, is the world’s way of thinking of success – based on the world’s idea of power. A successful church is the church who reveals the kingdom of God in all that we say and do. God’s kingdom is where there is selfless love of God, of neighbour, of the planet; where there is abundance enough for everyone, no social hierarchies, no prejudice, no injustice. Lent is our time to be hard on ourselves by being honest with ourselves in our personal lives and as the Church, Christ’s body. How can we untangle ourselves from the exploitive and destructive ways of the world? Where and how do we reveal God’s kingdom on earth as in heaven and where and how can we do this more than we currently do?

Each time we hear the devilish voice in our heads asking us, “Shouldn’t you be more and better? Shouldn’t you have more and better...more money, more people...?” Let us answer as Jesus answers: Away with you Satan. I will rely on God. I will use God’s power working in me to reveal God’s kingdom. I will worship only God and erase the world’s idea of power and success replacing it with God’s idea of power and success. This is easier said than done. It is hard work, constantly making choices because temptation is constantly in front of us. But, if we work together, it is worth the effort because, as Barbara Brown Taylor says, “before long you will hear another voice in your head, ten thousand times more beautiful than the first, “This is my beloved child,” the voice will say, “in whom I am well pleased.”