

Cultivating Faithfulness & Letting Go of Temptation

By Ridgley Joyner

Luke 4:1-13

While many of you are probably sick of the cold, I have come to simply *love* living somewhere with four seasons. The heat of the summer leads us out to the beaches and the lakes, spending time grilling outdoors and making the most of the long days. The crisp of Fall brings about a chill in the air and the colors are simply beautiful. They remind us of the change of a season-- marked by the death of plants, the shedding of leaves and buds, and their journey inward for the winter. As the days grow shorter we see the sun less and less and find ourselves in winter, spent mostly indoors, but if we dare, we'd go for a hike and breathe the cold air after a fresh blanket of snow lies on the ground, nourishing it for the next growing season. It is a time to slow down, a time to rest, a time to journey inward, to appreciate the light, to find renewal and make friends with the darkness all around us.

Renita Weems says "Winter returns a thousand times. But so does spring. . . . It's possible to live through winter. And when we do, we're glad, for there are lessons learned in the winter that not only cannot be learned in the spring but must be mastered in order to appreciate the spring."

Now March, March is the most volatile month for us here in PA. We have spring one day, winter the next, even the trees are as confused as us. Bulbs peak from the ground beginning to peak through the soil reminding us, it's coming! It's coming! New life is budding in our midst! It is the season of Spring that is my favorite, because when those warm days happen, everyone goes outside, and they're *SMILING* oh they're smiling. We can almost taste how close we are to those longed for summer days full of sunshine. It is also in March that people come out, start the yard work, dust off the pots, clear out the dead branches, lay the mulch. And of course my favorite, a time to plant seeds for the upcoming growing season.

I started growing my plants from seed on my own about 3 years ago. The first one was a bust, only about 3 survived. Last year, I used a fish tank in the sun to create a greenhouse for my seeds. And, well, I started them too soon. I even lost track of which plants were which and found that I didn't have what I *actually* needed come May. I learned last year that providing nitrogen rich fish based fertilizer helped the seedlings stay strong and continue growing roots. But I always find that every Lent, no matter how it falls in the calendar year, I am prepping my garden by cleaning out dead branches, laying nutritious compost and planting seeds.

It seems fitting that way, for Lent is the time in the Christian year when we take a step back, look at our lives and clean out the dead branches, dust off what we've let sit far too long and return to God, recommitting ourselves to cultivating abundant and faithful discipleship.

Today we planted a seed. We planted a seed to mark a season that began when we spread ashes, the dust of the earth on our foreheads Wednesday, proclaiming that in life and in the

face of death we belong to God. A season of winter that begs us to introspection, confession, and penitence.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. A season that many Christian churches observe in the liturgical year. While Advent is a time of waiting, preparation for Christ's second coming, Lent is marked by penitent acts, the observing of ones sinfulness, returning to God and facing our brokenness and mortality. It's the most cheerful season of the year! All jokes aside, while this season can easily be one of darkness and gloom, it is truly a time for observation, reflection, and introspection.

During Lent we focus on repentance, resisting temptation and the life, ministry and death of Jesus. On Wednesday we proclaimed what God can do in the dust by reminding ourselves of our mortality and also that in the face of that realization, we belong to God, in life and in death.

Lent is a time like winter that we pause, sit and make friends with the darkness of ourselves, face the hard parts—our sin and the ways we consistently fall short. It isn't always the most comfortable season, but it leads us to learn and grow in ways that lead us to a more joyful alleluia come Easter morning. It is through engaging in Lenten practice that we are able to experience the resurrecting love of God in Christ more authentically.

So often Lent gets boiled down to giving up something—I've given up Facebook, Amazon, Sugar, French Fries, the list goes on. The idea is that if we can give up something we love and feel we can't live without for 40 days, the temptation will remind us to turn to and think of God. Our text this morning shows us that temptation extends far beyond craving some chocolate or social media. Temptation is as subtle as too quiet of a space. Temptation lies within the fear of sitting with ourselves for too long. Because the temptation is to listen to what that evil little voice is saying through culture, through our relationships, through the way we perceive the world to be. Whether inside ourselves or out—temptation is all around. And the wilderness we find ourselves in will draw it out of us, soon enough.

Jesus's temptation in the wilderness. This is the text the lectionary gives us every year to begin Lent. We find ourselves here every year because our time in Lent is a time of discovery and introspection. And so often in scripture, people find themselves, discover truths about God and who they are as God's own, in the wilderness.

Right before our scripture reading this morning, we are taken back to the beginning of the season of Epiphany when we read of Jesus's baptism. When the clouds broke open and a dove landed on his head, the spirit anointed him and God said "this is my son, with whom I am well pleased"

Immediately after his miraculous baptism, Jesus, who is claimed by and filled with the Holy Spirit is led by this same Spirit into the wilderness. The beginning of his ministry is marked by his fasting in the desert for 40 days. And it is there, in a vulnerable state, Jesus faces himself.

Very quickly enters a new character. An unwanted companion uttering 3 temptations all beginning with one simple word: if. This dreadful word *if* that encompasses all fears. What *if* there's not enough? What *if* there is more than this? *If* I am this, why isn't it this way? *If* is rooted in a scarcity mindset. *If* invites *us* to take charge.

The evil spirit's "*if*" is meant to make Jesus doubt, fear the truths of God's providence. *If* is meant to invoke in Jesus a need to prove himself by testing God and abandoning God's call and purposes for his life. Resisting this temptation helps him discover his identity as a child of God, to wrestle with who he is, whose he is and how he is to live that out.

Jesus is tempted in three different ways: 1) to turn stones into bread, to exploit his gifts from God to rely on himself. 2) to rule all the kingdoms of the world, to use his power and influence to promote himself, not God. 3) To throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem, to prove himself by putting God to the test.

The temptation was a voice that sought to lure him away from the plans and purposes of God by whispering "There is something better to be had, don't you want to experience power and pleasure? Go ahead, turn the stones into bread, throw yourself off the cliff, claim all the kingdoms of the world as your own, prove yourself." The temptation to trade his identity as God's own by sticking to his own devices, exploiting his gifts for his own gain.

Jesus is in the wilderness for 40 days and this is no haphazard number. For it was also 40 days that Israel spent in the desert experiencing their own temptations, the temptation to rely on *themselves* rather than the One that created them. To exploit their gifts out of fear of what might be in the future rather than a God who gives gifts and will be who will be.

The reality is that we don't need to be out in wilderness for 40 days to experience temptation, but we do need 40 days to return to ourselves as God's own, with renewed understanding and faithfulness.

Whether it comes in the form of a tempter in the wilderness or a voice outside or within ourselves, all of us at one time or another will face temptation. In our baptism, we are claimed by God, gifted to serve God, and sent into the world to do ministry- to use our gifts to share the love of God.

But so often in the face of our belovedness, we stick to our own devices, exploit our gifts for personal gain, and only do what is convenient, or what benefits us. The temptation is to believe that we can do this life on our own, that God is a being far above that cares about us and loves us, but that God's providence can't be trusted because it depends on us letting go.

It depends on revealing parts of us we most fear. It depends on cultivating something new.

In the midst of the temptations to abandon his identity and God, Jesus cultivates within himself renewed faithfulness. He finds solace in the words of scripture, recalls God's providence for the

people of God in the past. Jesus reiterates the promises of God that Israel learned in the wilderness.

The wilderness is full of questions and fears and doubts and temptations, but what I hope we can remember from this passage today is that no matter where we find ourselves in the wilderness of this Lenten journey (and beyond!) that we do not go alone, God's spirit fills us, goes with us, and equips us with God's words to endure when our foundations get shaky, when sin infiltrates our lives, and when we begin to doubt the very identity as child of God.

As we struggle to live into our identity as beloved children of God and *how* that plays out, my prayer for us is that we might cultivate faithfulness in ourselves. That we would crowd out temptation and evil with the great good news of God's word, with the sweet songs of serving one another, loving our neighbor, helping those in need. That we would turn away from the temptations of using our gifts only for ourselves, to exploit God's love by making it exclusive. As we encounter all the ways we fall short in these coming days, may it be more than simply abstaining from that beloved chocolate to remind us of God.

Today we plant a seed, may it cultivate renewed faithfulness. Let us pray.

God of wilderness and water, your Son was baptized and tempted as we are. Guide us through this season, that we may not avoid struggle, but open ourselves to blessing.

We will wait for you, O God.

Your Spirit compels us

to go into the wilderness,

and we ask for the courage to examine

the desert places in our hearts,

and to be willing to

face the adversaries in our lives—

that which lures us away

from being who you have created us to be.

Amen.