

**1 Lent  
February 21, 2021**

**In the name of God, who in Jesus,  
taught us the meaning of unconditional Love.  
AMEN**

Since we were together last Sunday, a lot has happened as we follow our Liturgical Calendar. Last Sunday we celebrated the wonder and glory of the Transfiguration and it was the last Sunday of our Epiphany Season. Since then, even the look of our church has changed - from the vitality of our altar hangings and our vestments, to the very serious Lenten color, purple. And our Liturgy has changed from the uplifting joy of our Alleluias to the absence of that word...and from the happy tone of the Gloria to the penitential mood of the Kyrie; "Lord Have Mercy". We have experienced Ash Wednesday, a time that is summed up in the words that are said as ashes are placed on our foreheads in the sign of the cross...the very sobering words "...Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." Anyone who has experienced that moment can no doubt attest to the humbling impact those words have, to their power... to make us realize that we live and move and have our being by the Grace of God...a moment to remember that we are not as in charge of our lives as we might have let ourselves believe. What a powerful, simple service! If you did not tune in to it, I certainly encourage you to do so.

For me, personally, I welcome Ash Wednesday. I embrace the stark wake-up call; the reality of the words that accompany the imposition of ashes: "Remember ...yes...remember... that you are dust and to dust you will return." If we truly take this Lenten season seriously, as the church has intended it for us, we will do serious soul searching. We may even give up some of our less than holy habits. We may find ourselves more genuine, and feel more of a wholeness that what you see is what you get. We have 40 days to shed some old attitudes/some old behavior/some old way of interacting with another...and we have those same 40 days to become more authentic/more honestly and genuinely Christ followers than we have ever been before. Lent...the great season of spiritual and emotional preparation for Easter...has just begun!

So, here we are now at the first Sunday in Lent...and I think it is essential that we recognize that it is the first Sunday *IN* Lent, not the first Sunday *OF* Lent. Just as Jesus was in the world, but not *of* the world, so the Sundays between Ash Wednesday and Easter are *in* Lent but not *of* Lent. Precisely because *every* Sunday is a kind of Little Easter, *every Sunday celebrates the Victory* we have over temptation and sin, through the death and resurrection of our Lord, the Good Friday followed by Easter!! We need to realize that about Lent, and the fulness of its Good News for us...which is that...no matter what...there IS Easter!

I suggest that Now as we turn to today's Gospel, *THAT* is the heart of the story...the *VICTORY* over sin and temptation...that victory in the wilderness that we celebrate today. Perhaps sometimes we may not take this very seriously. We may not think Jesus was *really* tempted . . . not Jesus. But we need to understand that the temptations of Jesus were real temptations. Jesus *WAS* tempted. The New Testament clearly states this. Today's Gospel of Mark tells us plainly that Jesus was in the wilderness tempted by the devil. He did not say Jesus wondered, imagined, or that He considered His options.

He tells us He was TEMPTED, and that He was sent there to *be* tempted. Mark tells us He was tempted. Matthew tells us He was tempted. Luke tells us He was tempted. The book of Hebrews tells us, "He was in all points tempted as we are." That's the point...not what form the Bible tells us His temptations took. The importance of this is that temptations came to Jesus AND THE most important part of this message is Jesus' response!

The Bible says, "We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us" so let's turn to the Gospel reading and see how the temptations of Jesus and his responses might strengthen US, what his temptations might mean for *us*. We pray, "Lead us not into temptation." Yet the Gospel tells us that what WE wish to avoid, the SPIRIT led Jesus to endure! We read, "After he was baptized by John, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." Do you hear that? Jesus was led BY THE SPIRIT into the wilderness... there to be tempted by the Devil. SEE...the Holy Spirit was a part of this all along! WE pray that God will save us from temptation, but in the Scriptures we read that the Spirit LED Jesus into temptation. Obviously then, God had a purpose in leading Jesus to a time of temptation. The Bible tells us that Jesus was tempted in every way as we are, yet did not sin. Think of it: because Jesus came to live and die as one of us, he had to face temptations just as we do. Today's Gospel of Mark tells us the nature of the temptations and they are, in essence, the same temptations that we face: Temptations of Body/ Ego/ and Soul.

The first temptation that Jesus faced and the most common temptation that comes to *us* is the temptation to gratify the body...to feel good. The first temptation was to turn the stones into bread and thus satisfy his hunger. But the real temptation had little to do with stones or bread. It was about trusting God. Think of it...If Jesus used miracles to avoid problems, discomfort, temptations we face...he could hardly be considered LIKE us...then how could he be our Lord and Savior? Jesus was tempted to allow the desires of the body to take priority over his mission of obedience to God. In our day, many allow personal desires to distract them from their mission as the people of God. "If it feels good, do it" used to be a rather common saying, and the theme of many popular books. But, the gratification of the body should never be more important than the health of the soul.

And there was the temptation of the ego...to cast himself down...and have the angels rescue him. Obviously, if Jesus had succumbed to this temptation, he would have been an instant celebrity. Everyone would have noticed him. WE often face the temptation to want to have the acclaim of others. If we give into this to the detriment of being right with God, then the tempter has won. He got us...through an appeal to our ego.////

Then there was the temptation of the soul. Jesus was offered the whole world, if only he would worship the tempter. To worship anything or anyone more than God is sin. It is "missing the mark"; the real meaning of the word sin, missing the mark of being right with God. Certainly, in our day this temptation is rampant. There is always the temptation to put other Gods ahead of the Almighty...AND SADLY, TOO OFTEN WE DO! Some worship a God of power...like the story of Faust, who sold his soul to the devil in order to gain supernatural power. Others worship a God of material possessions, wanting this world's things more than they want God. Any temptation to put something ahead of God is a temptation which attacks the soul.

The following is a little story about temptation - one that I think we can easily picture. //// A sales representative finally got in for an appointment with the executive of a big company. He had been

trying to get a foot in the door for sometime. But just as he was about to begin his sales pitch, the staff assistant tapped on the door, entered the office and spoke quietly to the executive. The executive stood, apologized, and said she had to attend to an urgent matter and would return in a few minutes, and followed her assistant out of her office.

The sales representative looked around the executive's beautifully appointed office with pictures of her family on her desk. He also noticed a contract on her desk. She evidently had been considering a bid from a competitor just about the time he arrived. Leaning forward, he could see a column of figures, but it was covered by a can of diet soda. He was tempted to move the can so he could see the bottom line of his competitor's bid. What possible harm could there be in reading her private information? After all, she had left it in view. After wrestling with himself for a while, he finally decided to take a peek. As he lifted the soda can, he discovered it wasn't filled with soda at all. Instead, it was a bottomless can filled with hundreds of BBs which gushed out all over the desk and cascaded onto the carpet. ///// His attempt to shortcut the competition was obviously exposed. ///// Not every temptation is so obvious. Not every failure is so embarrassing. But every temptation is a challenge. No one escapes temptation!

Although we regularly pray..." Lead us not into temptation", Life regularly confronts us with temptations. But, remember, Jesus was tempted. In fact, he continued to have temptations throughout his life. For example, in the garden of Gethsemane, remember, at first he asked for the cup to be taken from him ///// and he was tempted at the very end of his life when one of the men, who was on the cross next to his, said, "If you ARE the Messiah, save yourself, and us."

We can be strengthened to be victors rather than victims by doing as Jesus did. He stayed focused on the most important thing in his life...his relationship with God the Father. He trusted God and he was obedient to God to the very end...and that's why he knew the Glory.

So today can remind us that in those times when we are in the wilderness trying to find our way through, and when temptation comes and offers the wrong answer, the wrong choice, the wrong use of power, the wrong partnership – then we would do well to remember that God has called our name – "This is my beloved son, my beloved daughter, in whom I am well pleased." And *remember* that because God has called our name, He *will* see us through. He *will* be with us, precisely because WE are His Beloved.

Our special relationship with Jesus Christ IS OUR STRENGTH. We will be tempted as Jesus was...but we will also be strengthened by God, as Jesus was. Remember the line of the Gospel today that said, "And he was with the wild beasts AND THE ANGELS came and waited on him." The victory we celebrate each Sunday is that Jesus stayed focused on his relationship with God, that he trusted God and was obedient, and so must we stay focused on our relationship with God and know that our higher angels will also be with US, ministering to US.

In speaking about temptation, I think it is important that we distinguish between thoughts and acts. ///// I think I may have shared this before but I'd like to share it again. Martin Luther, who had been tormented by evil thoughts and felt very guilty because of it, finally came to understand that human beings can not control all of the thoughts that pass through their minds, but they CAN be responsible

for accepting or rejecting those thoughts. Finally, Martin Luther concluded: "I cannot keep the birds from flying over my head, but, by the Grace of God, I can keep them from making a nest in my hair."

May God give US Grace in our times of temptation to keep sin from making a nest in our hearts.

And may this be a very special Lenten Season for each of us.

AMEN