

† READING FROM THE GOSPELS: Matthew 4:1-11

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Lent recalls the forty days in the wilderness Jesus spent in preparation for his ministry. However, the experience of his being tempted may be interpreted; Jesus had to make some very meaningful choices. How was he to carry out his mission?

It could have been an easy way out for Jesus. He could have said yes to all those wonderful choices. He could have taken care of his physical needs and also ended up owning the rest of the world with all the power and prestige to go with it. I couldn't have made the choices he made. How about you . . . what would you feel like after being left in the Judean desert to starve for 40 long hot and dry days as well as 40 sleepless cold nights with only the sound of the wind as your companion?

Now I will give myself a little credit . . . it is true that I wouldn't have turned those stones into bread . . . but I bet you would have found me on the top of that temple in Jerusalem eating a bag full of Quarter Pounders with cheese! Yet here we are at the very beginning of OUR six-week season of Lent . . . and in the space of just a few verses we hear the entire story of Jesus' own personal season of Lent.

Except I strongly suspect when we leave our Lenten season in a few weeks and awaken on Easter morning . . . we're not going to face the same hard choices Jesus faced. But we do need to remember . . . if Jesus didn't make the choices he made . . . there would be no reason for us to even bother getting up on Easter morning . . . much less walk through these 40 days of Lent. We would not have a Savior. You see, our Gospel lesson this morning is not so much about us and the choices we make when we are tempted . . . even though we are often tempted . . . no, this story is all about Jesus Christ and his love for you and me . . . this story is all about the power of God's grace.

Just before Jesus began his wilderness exodus . . . he was baptized in the River Jordan by John . . . and filled with the power of the Holy Spirit as he rose from those cold waters. That same Spirit led him out into the wilderness to face 40 days of desperation . . . 40 days of fear and pain and suffering . . . 40 days of extreme mental and spiritual deprivation . . . and then . . . at the very end of it all . . . when he is obviously at his weakest . . . that's when the Devil steps in to put an end to all this grace and salvation nonsense once and for all. I suspect the devil is the one feeling on top of the world at this moment. The great Jesus Christ . . . the Son of God . . . the Son of Man . . . the Messiah . . . is just about down and out. This looks way too easy. The devil has never had any problems with human beings before . . . tempting them . . . leading them astray . . . why should he have any trouble turning this one into a sinner . . . particularly one who is in such a weakened state of mind, body and spirit.

But this is actually a time of preparation for Jesus. His hardship in the wilderness has prepared him for what lies really ahead. We already know that Jesus will endure far greater suffering than this in his walk to the cross. So he has absolutely no problem dealing with Satan . . . oh, yes, he is worn down... but the power of the Holy Spirit within him has sustained him through those long days . . . and is still with him to take on whatever it is Satan can throw at him.

Jesus might not have had physical nourishment . . . but he has been fed by something far greater . . . something that will keep him filled on those long days of walking the hills and countryside of Galilee, a power that will be felt in the words he speaks as well as through his touch as he shares his love and compassion and grace with a spiritually hungry people . . .

So what hope would we have . . .if our Savior had chosen another way? Can you even begin to imagine the world without God's grace . . . without God's forgiveness.

As one writer points out to us:

“Temptation comes to us in moments when we look at others and feel insecure about not having enough. Temptation comes in judgments we make about strangers or friends who make choices we do not understand. Temptation rules us, making us to look away from those in need and to live our lives unaffected by poverty, hunger, and disease. Temptation rages in moments when we allow our tempter to define our lives or when addiction to wealth, power, influence over others, vanity, or an inordinate need for control defines who we are. Temptation wins when we engage in the justification of little lies, small sins: a racist joke, a questionable business practice for the greater good, a criticism of a spouse or partner when he or she is not around. Temptation wins when we get so caught up in the trappings of life that we lose sight of life itself. These are the faceless moments of evil that, while mundane, lurk in the recesses of our lives and our souls.”

(Maryetta Anshutz, *Feasting on the Word*, Year, Volume 2, p. 48)

So what hope would we have without a Savior? I can answer that question . . . ABSOLUTELY NONE.

That's why this story of Jesus in the wilderness is so important to us . . . because we fail when we face temptation . . . we fail over and over and over again. We are sinners . . . and as hard as we try not to sin . . .we don't have the power or the strength to turn away from temptation when we meet it.

As Paul tells us in the 7th chapter of Romans: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” (Romans 7:15) And without the grace and forgiveness of our Savior . . .we would have no hope . . . and death itself would be our ultimate end . . .no salvation... the point of life would be absolutely nothing.

But we do have a Savior . . . a Savior who knows everything about us . . . our good stuff and our bad stuff . . .a Savior who loves us . . . unconditionally loves us . . . Jesus knew us when he came up out of the waters of the Jordan . . . he knew us when he walked into that wilderness and faced 40 horrible days and nights alone . . . he knew us as he shared his ministry with the people . . . and he knew us when he turned his face toward Jerusalem and humbly carried a cross from which he was hung and died. But it was there that our Savior defeated death . . .completely and forever . . . because death no longer holds any power over us . . .because of the grace of Jesus Christ poured into our lives . . . It is here at this table that we . . . who are so spiritually hungry . . . are called to be filled with God's grace and God's forgiveness and God's promise of salvation to those who accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

I pray with all my heart that you will not leave this church hungry this morning . . . I pray that after you are fed with the bread of life and the cup of salvation . . . it will sustain you in the coming weeks . . . as you, too, continue your journey through Lent . . .toward that glorious Easter morning still to come.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.