

"Temptation"

Matthew 4:1-11

February 10, 2008

Welcome to the season of lent. Lent was originally established for new Christians, those who experienced a call and wanted to commit their lives to Jesus - publically, that commitment took the form of Baptism.. In the very early church it involved a 40 hour fast. Later it was 7 days to allow for deeper reflection and finally, by in large because of our Gospel text today, it became 40 days. Those who wanted to commit their lives to Christ, were to spend forty days and forty nights preparing for their baptism by fasting, prayer and reflection. If at the end they still wanted to follow Jesus, then on Easter they would be baptized as the sun was rising in the east, signaling the new day, the new era in their lives, inaugurated because of the Resurrection.

I am sure it had a powerful significance for them, to have prepared for their lives as Christians the same way that Jesus prepared for his vocation as the Messiah: forty days of introspection, self-examination and re-commitment of their lives. I think that it was great that Lent eventually became a time for all Christians to walk thru that 40 days period as a time for self-examination and reflection on the call of God on all Christians lives. I am not sure if the early church took the season more seriously than we do or not. It seems that it is so easy for us to just assume that once we have joined the church, we really don't have to think about it any more. Yes I was baptized - yes, I joined the church - of course I want to be a Christian - just don't bug me about it.

I remember hearing someone suggest something really radical - I liked the idea - as have many pastors who have heard the idea - - - but I don't have the guts to try it and I have never heard of a church that actually did it. The notion was that every year the membership roster of the church should be emptied and everyone had to go through a period of self examination to decide if they really wanted to recommit to following Christ for another year. It is really a radical idea - but the reality is that we must make that decision every day. Every day we are faced with a world full of temptations that force us to ask ourselves if we will follow Christ or the world. What do you think?

We take who and what we are so much for granted. Jesus was driven into the wilderness and forced to consider the question, - will you be the person you have been sent to be? Or, will you just give in to the temptation to think only of yourself?

We have often looked closely at the temptation that Jesus faced there in the wilderness. Forth days tempted by the devil. Turn stones to bread. Be a hero - everyone will love you. I will give you power over all the kingdoms of the world if only you fall down and worship me. They are strange and incredibly enticing temptations. But Jesus responded by remembering who He was He was Son of God. Jesus responded by turning to the Word of God. Jesus turned away from the tempter and the temptations choosing rather to walk the path that God had set before Him.

We could talk a lot about the temptations that Jesus faced in His forth day struggle in the wilderness. But I suspect that it may be more important for us to consider what it is that we face in our wilderness journeys when we confront the temptations that are all around us. To question whether of not we face temptations would be silly - they are all around us everyday and we know it. Sometimes we may not thing that the temptations that we face are a big deal and we dismiss them and make it easy to give in to the temptation. We know what they are - they come to us individually. One persons temptations may not be another's struggles. But we know what tempts us to be something other than what God wants us to be. And it is probably because of the very fact that temptations are so individual - so personal that I believe that even beginning to list the temptations we face is fruitless. In some ways, how we deal with those temptations is the same. Each of us must face the temptations individually. I can not tell you what you must do or how you will be able to stand for God rather than give in to the tempter. What I can do is point you to the source of light, strength and life.

As I was doing some reading this week I found a fascinating article that talked about dog collars – now doesn't that sound fascinating. Actually, the article was talking about all of the technological advances we have in our day. The article talked about how many pets are now being injected with a tiny chip which can be read by a scanner that contains all kinds of information about the pet. So if the pet gets lost, it can be taken to a vet that has a scanner and they will instantly know everything they need to know. And then there are the collars - I've heard about the dog collars that are used for training purposes. The collar is able to send a light electrical jolt either at the command of the dog owner or if the dog crosses a point where there is a invisible fence. It is sold as a great way to train your dog to stay home and resist the temptation to run. Tongue in check, the article suggested that if we love our kids as much as we love our pets maybe parents should help their kids tow the mark by doing the same kinds of things. Specifically the article said at one point: ***"If we are as concerned for our children's safety and welfare as we are for Rover's, shouldn't we micro-chip our kids as well? In fact wouldn't it be great if along with a continual tracking/locating device a small camera could record their every move. Wait. I could even do better. Add on a tiny electric zapper and think what parents could do!"***

See Suzie starting to get in a car with someone who is unsavory. Give her a little zap. A buzzer records Tommy's car going over the speed limit? Give him a reminder zap. Detect the presence of alcohol on anybody, anywhere, anytime? Big, big zap." The article was really cute but clearly stated that it is not the way to go. It said that even his dog figured out that a momentary 'zap' was a small price to pay for the freedom on the other side of the invisible fence. Temptations come in so many ways that we can not try to control people by having someone with a 'zapper' ready to get us if we start to fall to temptation. Rather God places His word in our hearts and invites us to follow Him. God comes to speak to us and invites us to listen for the guidance and word of life that we so desperately need to know in this world of temptations. God does not sit up in His heavens ready to zap us if we choose the wrong path but invites us to walk closely enough with Him that we can call upon that powerful Word of God to wage war against the forces of temptation, just as Jesus did in the wilderness.

Lent is upon us. How is it that it has become a time to give up chocolate, or hamburgers, or video games? The temptation or "tests" that the devil flung at Jesus after his forty-day-fast in the wilderness weren't just challenges to DO something he wasn't supposed to do. They were challenges tempting Jesus to BE someone he was not born to be. During this season let us consider again who we are - as children of God let us re-commit to being who we are and stand firm in that against the temptations that we face.

AMEN