



Sermon for the First Sunday of Lent
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March 1, 2020

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

The fasting of Lent has begun and our gospel text today is sort of the origin story for Lent. We fast because Jesus fasted and our Lenten season of preparation lasts forty days because Jesus fasted for forty days. Of course, fasting isn't always as easy as it sounds.

A Irishman moved to a small village in the countryside. His first night there he went to the local pub, ordered three beers, and then sat in a booth by himself and drank them slowly. The next night he returned and did the same – and again the night after that. Finally the bartender asked him why he drank three beers every evening. “Well, I had two brothers – one moved to America and one to Australia. Before they left we promised each other we'd each drink three beers, one for each brother, every evening to keep our family bond.”

This went on for several months and soon the whole village knew the story. One night the man came in and only ordered two beers, went and sat by himself and sadly drank them both. The whole pub watched in sadness, realizing that one of the brothers must have died. Finally the bartender asked which brother the man had lost. “Oh,” he replied, “you'll be happy to know they are both alive and well but I've given up beer for Lent!”

There are two aspects of Jesus' fasting that I'd like you to take note of on this first Sunday of Lent.

First of all, notice that Jesus has embraced powerlessness. Even though he is the second person of God in the flesh, the one through whom all things were created, he does not enter into our life or share with us in our suffering by drawing on his divine power. He is like us in every way. When he goes into the wilderness he is alone. When he does not eat he is famished. And when he faces evil he faces it down by his reliance on the Holy Spirit and the words of Holy Scripture, not by playing the trump card of his own divine nature.

Each of the temptations set before him is a temptation to not be powerless. They are each temptations to use power in wrong ways. The devil tempts him to violate the nature of stones and bread in order to feed his

own need. He tempts him to bring the Kingdom of God about by political and military force. And he tempts him to prove his divine Sonship by a powerful display of God's favor for him. In each case, though, Jesus refuses to fall into the temptation that the end justifies means.

We learn as we watch Jesus face down evil on our behalf that the end does not justify the means. Sometimes in the face of struggle and challenge and difficulty we are tempted to accomplish good goals by evil means but Jesus shows us that it not only matters what we accomplish it also matters how we accomplish it. Sometimes, instead of trying to get what we want by any means necessary, we are called to follow the Spirit's lead and trust God's promises to us in scripture.

Secondly, I would ask you notice all that has come before this. Before Jesus faces down the devil, proclaims the gospel, heals the sick, or rises from the dead, he is the beloved child of God.

We need only look at the previous three chapters of Matthew to see this. The first chapter is his miraculous birth. Then the second chapter is all about the visit of the Magi and the flight to Egypt, by which this beloved child of God is blessed to survive in the midst of a hostile world. Then in chapter three we see his baptism, in which he is literally called "the Beloved" by God.

There is a lesson here for us: before we confess our sins, before we seek to amend our lives, before we fast or pray or walk in the disciplines of Lent, we are The Beloved of God. Included in Christ's sonship we are beloved children of God – beloved not because we have done or said or believed the right things but beloved because God loves us in Christ. Period.

We should let these two themes of Jesus' fasting guide us through Lent: that our power comes not from our efforts make the end justify the means but from the Spirit and word of God and that we are first of all and always the beloved children of God, however well or poorly we may do in our Lenten disciplines. Our confidence that our fasting, prayer, and work will produce good results in our lives is rooted in our confidence that the same Holy Spirit which sustained Jesus in the wilderness will sustain us through the coming weeks and bring us safely to the day of the resurrection.

Amen.