

DISCIPLINES OF FAITH: FASTING

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Luke 4:1-13

In our reading today, Jesus encounters the devil. The Greek word for devil should sound familiar. It is *diabolos*. We also find such titles in Scripture as tempter, adversary, ruler of darkness, and others. In other places, he is known by the Hebrew name Satan.

In the early Old Testament, Satan first appeared as an agent of God, working with God. His role was to uncover the weaknesses of humans. We find this in his appearance as the serpent in the garden.

Later on, Satan becomes increasingly hostile and harmful. He interferes with God's relationship to the people Israel through temptation, accusation, and disruption.

Gradually, Satan's identity shifts to becoming God's chief competitor, and we start to witness this cosmic struggle between the forces of good and light and those of evil and darkness. Satan is the force of evil in the world.

In the Gospels, we find God and Satan locked into a great showdown—a shootout at the OK Corral. And that is where we find ourselves today with the passage of the Jesus' temptation. And in this showdown, the devil gets his backside handed to him on a platter.

The Gospel of Luke opens with the accounts of the births of Jesus and of John the Baptist. We are also provided a glimpse into Jesus' life as a child. Then the gospel reintroduces us to John some years later who is now offering the Jews the opportunity to be baptized as a sign of their repentance of sins. Jesus comes to John to be baptized in the Jordan River.

Here, we read these words: *when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

Luke tells us, *Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. He fasted for forty days and nights.*

Now, by fasting, we don't know if he ate nothing at all or simply lived on some reduced diet. It doesn't really matter. No matter how you cut it, forty days of fasting is a serious endeavor. At the end of the fast, he was ravenous.

But remember, Jesus was not lost in the wilderness; this fast was not an episode of Survivor. This was a spiritual retreat, an alone time for prayer and contemplation. This fasting was a discipline. It was a means of drawing closer to God. If the situation ever got dire, Jesus could walk home. He may have been hungry—famished even—but he was not perishing. Spiritually, he was strong. That that sustains him.

At the end of this time of fasting and prayer is the moment when the devil appears. And the devil presents to Jesus three powerful temptations to Jesus: 1. to make food, 2. to rule the world, and 3. to be protected. I like to think of these three as Sustenance, Sovereignty, and Security.

Sustenance

The first temptation has to do with Sustenance. Here the devil says, *If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.*

Which stone? Any stone. The landscape is littered with rocks. We look at this as a temptation for Jesus to conjure food to eat. For Jesus it is just a parlor trick to turn a rock into a roll. The devil really wants Jesus to prove that he has power, to prove that God has power. And Jesus' response is not to show off but to rely on scripture. He quotes scripture saying, *'One does not live by bread alone.'*

This is not just a saying but is a quote from the section of the book of Deuteronomy which recounts the story of Israel's forty years in the wilderness. In the wilderness, the people had no food. But God sustained them with manna as a reminder that all we have comes from God. God has power; but God's power does not need to be proven.

Sovereignty

The second temptation has to do with Sovereignty. Here, the devil takes Jesus to a high mountain and *in an instant* shows him *all the kingdoms of the world*. And the devil promises Jesus: *To you I will give their glory and all this authority.*

Jesus does not take the bait. He responds, *It is written, 'Worship the Lord you God, and serve only him.'*

The promise here is that if Jesus will shift his allegiance to the devil, then he can rule the world. But as Jesus knows, the world is not the devil's to give. His quote from Deuteronomy is from a larger passage reminding the Israelites that all that they have—their wealth and comfort, their homes and farms—is a gift from God. It is God's to give, not the devil's.

Security

The devil took Jesus to Jerusalem, to the pinnacle of the temple. This is a tall wall of the temple built on the edge of a cliff. It was a terrifying and deadly drop from that point. The devil tells Jesus, *If you are the Son of God, jump.* Now, why

would Jesus do that? The devil then shows that two can play the scripture-quoting game. The devil picks Psalm 91 and goads Jesus to leap saying, *[God] will command his angels concerning you, to protect you. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.*

The promise here is that God protects his own, and if Jesus is truly God's Son, then God will surely protect him.

Jesus turns away this final temptation with a quote from Deuteronomy, *It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'* The full quote from Deuteronomy says, *Do not put the Lord our God to the test, as you tested him at Massah.*

Again, when the Israelites were in the wilderness for forty years, they ran out of water. They complained to God. God viewed their complaints as a test. If they had faith, they would know that God would provide for them. By complaining and challenging God, they were essentially saying, "Can you really help us or not." "Are we safe here in the wilderness with you, or should we try something else?"

When the devil challenges Jesus to jump off the cliff to let the angels catch him, Jesus' response is that he does not need to. He has faith in God. Jumping would just demonstrate a lack of faith.

The devil has enough and so he leaves.

In this three-round match between Jesus and the devil, Jesus wins each round. And the temptations are not really about sustenance, or sovereignty, or security. They are not about having food, or being safe, or having power. They are all about our faith in God.

And ultimately, the devil has nothing to offer. He can't give food; he can't offer security; he has no kingdom to give. His only power is to lure us away from our faith in God.

Testing God is a sign of our weakness, not God's.

Series

Today is the first Sunday of the Season of Lent. Lent began this week on Ash Wednesday and will continue for seven weeks until we celebrate the Resurrection of the Lord on Easter. During this time of Lent, I will be preaching a series of sermons on that am calling "Disciplines of Faith." Each week, we will look at a different Christian spiritual discipline. Today, that discipline is fasting.

The season of Lent is popularly known as a time of "giving up"—denying ourselves something that we enjoy. Us Protestants believe that it is from our Catholic cousins that we've been handed the practice of abstaining from some experience that gives us joy. Lent, we have come to believe, is a time to miserable.

But we would be wrong. Lent should be a time of self-reflection and preparation, a time when we seek to strengthen our sacred connection with God as we prepare for Easter. That should bring us great joy. Lent is a time of joy.

Certain Christians, including Roman Catholics and those in Orthodox churches, traditionally fast during Lent, taking only one meal a day. While some fast through all of Lent, Catholics in the U.S. are obligated to fast only on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. American Catholics are also expected to abstain from eating meat on Ash Wednesday and on all Fridays during Lent.

So, what is fasting? Fasting is the abstinence of food or drink for a specified duration. In the Bible, fasting is for spiritual purposes and normally demands abstaining from all food, solid or liquid, but not from water. Fasts vary in length from one meal to forty days. There are also partial fasts in which the diet is restricted. For example, your fast may mean that you won't eat meat for a week.

Don't think of fasting as outward "works" that will earn you points with the Lord. Fasting is an inner spiritual discipline. As Jesus tells us, *And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you* (Matthew 6:16-18).

Fasting, by the act of abstaining, reminds us that food does not sustain us, God sustains us. We are not to rely on food for life, but God. The writer Richard Foster goes so far as to say that fasting is a feast. We are feasting on the Word of God. It is the Word that sustains us, not food.

Fasting becomes a spiritual discipline when it strengthens our relationship with our Lord. Fasting highlights the emptiness in our lives—the emptiness that we try to fill with worldly things. Denial makes room for the divine. Denial also opens the door for temptation that challenges our faith. The suffering of a fast can even become our crucifixion, imitating the suffering of Christ. I like to employ fasting as a time of prayer. When I want that thing that I am giving up, I say a prayer. I seek to fill the emptiness with the holy.

This year, as a partial fast, I am going to give up ice cream. That may sound superficial, but it is not. Every night about nine, I go to the kitchen and scoop a, let's say, small bowl of tasty ice cream. But for Lent this year, I hope to redirect my desire for ice cream into a communion with the Lord. Every night, I will likely stare at the freezer and wish that I had chosen brussel sprouts instead.

During this season of Lent, I want to encourage you to set a time of fasting. Fasting is not a trivial matter, so start small. Make it meaningful. I pray that as you engage in a discipline of fasting that it will become a meaningful part of your Lenten journey toward the Resurrection.