

First Sunday of Lent
March 10, 2019
Brandon McGinnis

Luke 4:1-12

The War in the Wilderness

There is a battle raging in the wilderness. The temptation of Jesus in our Gospel reading this morning is not merely an assessment of Jesus' self-control or his spiritual discipline; it is, in fact, the beginning of a war for the allegiance of humankind.

The battle raging in the wilderness is between two kingdoms: the heavenly Kingdom of God on the one hand, and the false, earthly kingdom of Satan on the other.

Immediately after his baptism, Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit into the desert region beyond the River Jordan. The Gospel wants us to recall how God had led the nation of Israel into the wilderness after their passage—their baptism—through the Red Sea.

And just as Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, so Jesus fasts in the wilderness for 40 days. And it is in that place, alone and famished, that Jesus is tested by humankind's primordial enemy.

The Judean wilderness is a vast expanse of rocky hills and ravines. Plants and animals are few and far between. And, when one stands still, all that can be heard is the angry whispering of the desert wind.

Out of the wind comes the voice of Eden's serpent: *If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.* No doubt, the devil had heard what God said of Jesus at his baptism: *This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.* The devil would have him prove it.

Bread must have sounded heavenly to a starving Jesus. The devil would see Jesus succumb to the instant gratification of the desires of the flesh—saving himself instead of relying on God's sustenance. And perhaps the devil pushed a little further: *Look at all these stones! You could feed the whole world if it all became bread.* But Jesus knows that it is the armies of Satan who march on their stomachs. He knows that the citizens of the Kingdom of God hunger for more than bread. So, quoting from the Law of his people in Deuteronomy 8:3, Jesus chooses God's way: *One does not live by bread alone.* Jesus: 1. Satan: 0.

In the delirium of Jesus' ongoing fast, the devil takes him on an instantaneous tour across time and space to view all the kingdoms of the world. In full sight of all their power, prestige, and luxury, the devil makes Jesus an offer: *To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please.* In other words, the devil—or, as John's Gospel calls him, the Ruler of this World—says, *All the kingdoms of the earth—every state, nation and empire—is under my authority. Every ruler, governor, and president serves at my pleasure. And they could all be yours if you will worship me.*

The security offered by an earthly kingdom must have sounded good to Jesus, standing exposed to the elements in the territory of bandits and beasts. The devil would see Jesus exchange the defense and protection of God for that of the nations. And perhaps the devil pushed a little further: *If you want to save the world, why not take direct control and perform a little regime change?* But Jesus knows who really rules the world, even if it has been handed over for a season to this Prince of Darkness. And, so Jesus again chooses God's way and quotes from Deuteronomy 6:13: *Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.* Jesus: 2. Satan: 0.

Finally, the devil transports Jesus to the highest point on the temple in Jerusalem. Overlooking the religious and political center of God's chosen people, the devil dares Jesus to jump: *If you are the Son of*

God, throw yourself down from here. Then Satan quotes Psalm 91—the psalm we read together this morning: *God’s angels will surely bear you up.*

Not only does the devil know his scriptures, he knows how best to misinterpret them. In Jesus’ time, Psalm 91 had become an amulet psalm: the faithful would inscribe the words of the psalm onto pendants and it was thought that wearing them could ward off danger or harm. Likewise, reciting Psalm 91 was thought to invoke God’s aid in moments of peril. The devil took a psalm that originally described trust in God’s providence and twisted into a means of controlling God’s protective power.

The devil would see Jesus throw caution to the wind and force God’s hand. And perhaps again the devil pushed a little further: *If God saves you in front of all these people, they’ll know that God is on your side and they’ll have to acknowledge you as the Son of God.* But Jesus knows that God is no subordinate to human hubris and that trying to control God will not yield religious reform, but self-destruction. So, quoting from Deuteronomy 6:16, Jesus chooses God’s way again: *Do not put the Lord your God to the test.* Jesus: 3. Satan: 0.

After 40 days of constant testing, the devil is down for the count. The battle raging in the wilderness is finally won. Aided by the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus enacted in practice what the book of Deuteronomy outlined in principle. In 40 days Jesus rendered to God the obedience that Israel failed to give for 40 years in the wilderness.

You see, the wilderness journey of Israel was supposed to be an exercise in trusting in God’s deliverance, defense, and power. Israel has seen what human “power” looked like in Egypt: the kingdom of Satan seeking greatness through oppression and bloodshed. But, in the wilderness, God was helping Israel unlearn the habits of empire, weaning them off of the need for worldly security.

This process of God delivering Israel is recounted in our Old Testament reading this morning. But, what is absent from that account is how, time and time again, Israel failed: they continually begged for bread, sought the protection of worldly power, and routinely put God to the test.

Israel had 40 years of failure; Jesus had 40 days of faithfulness.

But, lest we think ourselves superior to our forbearers in the faith, I will say this: Jesus not only rendered to God the obedience that Israel failed to give, but also the obedience that the Church often fails to give.

Throughout its history, the Church has embraced those things which Jesus rejected: the instant gratification of the flesh and its desires; worldly power, prestige, and luxury; and the forcing of God’s hand and claiming his power for our own. All too often, the church – the Kingdom of God on the ground—has colluded with the false kingdom of Satan; ceding its territory to that Prince of Darkness.

But, in the season of Lent, the Church joins Jesus in his 40 day fast—joining in his battle against Satan. Lent is a season of spiritual warfare in which we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to overcome the same testing that Jesus overcame.

Lent is often described as a journey, but it is, in fact, a war. We are not merely giving something up for Lent; we are taking up arms in spiritual warfare. And the Church has issued three traditional weapons for the season of Lent: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

In their own way, each of these spiritual disciplines helps us to truly unlearn the habits of empire: fasting denies our gratification of the desires of the flesh, almsgiving denies our idolatrous reliance on worldly powers for security, and prayer denies our hubristic efforts to force God’s hand in our favor. When we do these things—when we pray, abstain from food, and give to the poor—we pledge our allegiance to the Kingdom of God and participate in the victory of Jesus.

St. Paul says in our epistle this morning: *If you confess with your lips that Jesus Christ is Lord... you will be saved.* But we cannot merely pay lip service to Jesus as our Lord while remaining comfortably loyal to

the kingdom of Satan. Calling Jesus “Lord” without amendment of life does not more good than wearing a Psalm 91 amulet. If we truly believe and confess that Jesus is Lord, then we must do battle.

This is what Lent is for. Amen.