

God and our '40's'

King of Glory Lutheran Church

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Year A; Lent 1: Matthew 4:1-11

¹ Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. ² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished. ³ The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." ⁴ But he answered, "It is written,

'One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' "

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you,'
and 'On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.' "

⁷ Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' "

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, ⁹ and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

'Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.' "

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

When we are at our wits end, we are tempted to believe untrue things about our identity in God. And we are tempted to believe that God will leave us. Jesus Christ's struggle in the wilderness shows us the very opposite. He demonstrates what it means to be in relationship with God.

Have you ever been at your wits end? Nothing seems to be going right! What you thought was going to happen didn't happen. You get up on the wrong side of the bed, you burn your tongue on the coffee, the boss wanted the report yesterday and you missed the e-mail, your golf score was the worst it's ever been, the kids won't quit fighting and there is no place in the house to go where it's quiet. You are at your wits end.

That's the '40s' people of God. Let me explain.

Jesus fasted in the wilderness 40 days and 40 nights. He was led by the spirit into this desolate space.

Rain fell 40 days during the flood. God was wiping out wickedness to begin a new with the people on earth.

Due to their disobedience, the Israelites wandered for 40 years in the wilderness.

Moses was on Mount Sinai for 40 days and nights receiving God's law.

Jonah warned Ninevah of God's destruction for 40 days.

As you have guessed by this list, 40 is a significant biblical number. It represents a time period of purification or testing or trial before a new beginning that God will enact with God's people. But in everyday language, 40 can simply be translated as someone, or a community at their wits end.

Have you ever been at your wits end? I know I have. It wasn't pretty. The person that struggles with drug addiction finally hits bottom and realizes they need help. Your spouse doesn't seem to be as perfect as they were on your wedding day. You're at your wits end, and are tempted to betray their trust. A city is at its wits end with a land developer's lawsuit. Those in charge would rather just wash their hands of the whole problem, than find a way to deal with it.

We pray, we go to counseling, we advocate, we do everything possible with God's help. But nothing changes and God doesn't seem to be answering. Wits end.

Then we turn inward on ourselves thinking we have the power to fix problems. Or we step outside of boundaries and promises we have made to ourselves or to others seeking relief in greed or power, gossip, substances or other un-healthy habits.

Jesus went through his own period of testing. Right after His baptism, God's spirit leads Jesus into this desolate place for 40 days and 40 nights. To prepare, he hasn't had food for days and days. It appears that this is just as much a part of setting up Jesus for his mission as his baptism. But God never leads us to a place where God's grace will not provide.

At the core of this experience, is a question of identity. The tempter begins each of the three questions by saying, "if you are the son of God."

'In other words, "How do you know you are God's Son?" ...Turn stone to bread, jump from the Temple, worship me...and you will never know doubt again. You will know. You will be sufficient on your own." ...Jesus responds by refusing to establish his own worth and identity. Instead, He remains dependent on God. Jesus knows *who* he is, that is, by remembering *whose* he is.'

God gives us everything that we need. Food, strength, patience, wisdom. Yet time and again we believe that we are strong enough, or wise enough, to do life on our own terms. We try one remedy, and if that doesn't work we try something else. If that doesn't work we try something else. And the circle, the pattern, continues again and again and again. I know because I do it. Do you?

Or there is this emptiness in our spirit. We try to fill it up with shopping or the latest meme or the video that's getting the most likes, or the movie with our favorite actor. The emptiness goes away as long as we are distracted. But it returns again when we're done with that delicious dessert.

Adam and Eve were told by God what they could and could not do to enjoy everything God had given them in the garden. But they wanted more. The fruit was absolutely delicious. But after they ate it, there was an emptiness in their spirits because they had wandered away from God to do life on their own terms.

They forgot, who created them. They forgot the source of their life was God. They forgot their primary identity: children of God.

Satan was tempting Jesus to prove that he could do life on his own. Yet right before this wilderness testing, Jesus had heard God's voice say to him, "You are my son the beloved. With you, I am well pleased."

In Jesus baptism, God gives to Jesus an identity and a purpose. The same is true for you and me. We are a beloved daughter or son of God. We are to let God's light shine through us in our words and our actions, our commitments and our vocations.

But we too are tempted to believe the darkness is better than God's light. The temptation of a self-pride, or self-loathing, or self-abandonment is easier and more fulfilling than walking into God's light where there is never any darkness. We forget who has a claim upon our lives in this life and the next. We forget there is one who loves us more than we can ever imagine. We forget when two flowers are

planted in a garden, they never compete for the others' beauty. They simply bloom in all the glory their creator has given them.

Martin Luther was holed up in a castle translating the Greek Bible into German so regular folks could read the Word of God for the first time. He struggled mightily with doubt and discouragement from what he understood to be the devil. And he was known to not only throw the occasional ink pots at whatever was tormenting him and causing him to doubt God's promises, but while doing so he could be heard throughout the castle grounds shouting "I am baptized".

Not 'I was baptized', but 'I am baptized.' Present tense and ongoing. God through baptism claims us and holds us and tells us whose we are. Nothing can release that hold God has on us. Nothing. Evil and sin in the world are very real. Human choices cause consequences that bring suffering not only to ourselves but to others and communities as well. We will be at our wits end again.

But there is hope! Day after day we can practice with intention living with God through our temptations. We trust in God's strength and power. Jesus' testing gives us strength to face our own. The temptations won't go away. Yet with God's help, we can face them together.

I heard an interview of Alex Ferreira the USA gold medalist in the halfpipe freestyle skiing. He said the first thing he thought about in the morning was winning gold. The last thing he thought about at night, was winning gold. For the next 40 days, your assignment is, if you choose to accept it - remember the first thing in the morning and the last thing at night we are baptized and that is our identity from God. Trusting God in all things and through all things, is a lifelong journey. We won't be experts next week! Give yourself grace. God certainly does!

Coming down the rows at this time is a little card that you might want to post on the refrigerator or on your mirror to see every day through the days of Lent. Trust it's words. Believe it's message. Walk in God's light! Amen .

¹ David Lose. Working Preacher Commentary. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/first-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-matthew-41-11>