



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for Sunday, March 10, 2019

The First Sunday in Lent

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Deuteronomy 26:1-11 | Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16 | Romans 10:8b-13 | Luke 4:1-13

Sometimes when Lent begins I am reminded of a student I had in a Classical Latin seminar on Vergil; asked to comment on a passage and finding it hard, she said she knew the word giving trouble was a verb, but she didn't know what to do with it; so with Lent sometimes.

One way to confront and transact Lent is to keep in mind that we have been here before. Year by year if we make our annual pilgrimage to this place in the Church year, a place where we are invited to start all over again, and perhaps to take stock of our journey forward, we may first look back on our previous attempts to deal with what our Collect this morning calls our many temptations and weaknesses. These somewhat anxious attempts to bring our life under control, perhaps by undertaking to give up something for Lent or otherwise taking on something for Lent, may not in past Lents have turned out the way we planned. If we bear in mind that maybe Lent is the time to give up control, we could be led by the Spirit into the wilderness of our lives just as they are right now. Lent ideally is about exposure to the truth. Barriers to that truth need to be addressed so that we can enter more freely into the reality of God in our lives.

Luke's Gospel moves from Jesus being full of the Holy Spirit to his being led into the emptiness of the desert wilderness in Judea. There he begins to confront his vocation. We too all need to take stock of ourselves, and Lent is a very good time to do that: our prayers and our readings Sunday by Sunday will confront our inevitable failures in keeping our Baptismal promises and other shortcomings of being human, which are not easy to admit. The Gospel relates how Jesus was tempted three times by the Devil. These temptations are ours as well. He tries to get Jesus to forget that baptismal identity he received at the Jordan. He begins by tempting Jesus to use his great powers for personal comfort and gain. So when he asks him to change stones into bread, he is also asking him to do something God created into something personally useful: hence our tendency sometimes to see and use and treat the world, and even other fellow humans beings, as useful personal conveniences for us. We need to be watchful not to be tempted to manipulate people and the world to suit ourselves.

The devil next offers glory and political influence and authority when he shows Jesus in an instant all the kingdoms of

the world he controls. He challenges Jesus to acknowledge someone other than God the Father as his Master and Lord in return for dominion over all the kingdoms of the world.

This offering of power is not too different from what we see around us today: modern success is all too often measured by subtly getting what we want by unobtrusively setting aside the values that come with being not only a Christian but an ethical human being. We falsely think that we attain power in exchange for worshipping or privileging greed, pride and arrogance. Once we start that it's hard to stop.

Finally Jesus is challenged to use his power as the Son of God to reveal himself spectacularly to his contemporaries; he is tempted to conform to popular contemporary ideas of what a heaven-sent leader and Messiah of the people would be and do; he could do this by a sign like throwing himself down from the roof of the Jerusalem temple and surviving, caught by angels. Again the Gospel here is telling us that we may well be tempted to manipulate people and the world by setting God aside for our own spectacular achievements and successes. It can be very perilous to think that no matter what chances you take, especially with your life, God is supposed to take care of you. It's called putting the Lord our God to the test. A milder form of this is thinking that God will make it all come out right in the end. Compromising our faith so as to go along with contemporary values can undermine more than we realize. The enemy wanted to change Jesus' proclamation of God's kingdom into a proclamation of the standards and values of the world, which we encounter every day. With Jesus, it fails even when the devil quotes the Bible. But such attempts are made on us all too frequently in our daily lives.

Sometimes we even contrive such opportunities ourselves.

Being fully God and fully human, Jesus knows what we face. He faced it himself: the power that tries to turn us from God. So many things in our life can divert our attention from God and end in our forgetting him.

How to use Lent? Lent is a good time to begin looking over our baptismal promises and seeing how keeping them is working out right now. After all, there's a lot at stake, and a lot to lose.