

Year A – Lent One – 05 March 2017
Matthew 4:1-11

On Ash Wednesday I welcomed all who gathered to Lent. And so, to all of you who were not able to be here, I say to you as well, “welcome to Lent”. This is not exactly what you might expect to hear on this day or in this season. Lent is not a time that many ‘welcome’ in the traditional sense. It is not a season that we look forward to. It is not a particularly beautiful time in the world outside as we still move through snow to rain to mud, and maybe snow again. It is that time of year when the days are beginning to get longer and yet the evenings still seem interminable. There just doesn’t seem to be much that is welcome about this time of the year – out there in the world or right here in the church. And yet, I am welcoming you.

The welcome I extend to you is more along the lines of your grandmother offering you that dreaded cod liver oil or you offering Buckley’s cough medicine to your grandchildren. It tastes horrid but it works ... Lent is not a happy time, but it is good for you. It is good for you in that old-fashioned sense that rather than skipping over the difficult parts of life, living through the hard times is character building and actually helps you to grow and mature. And so, you have a choice to make. You can pretend that this liturgical, or church, season is just like any other and ignore the depth, the difficulty, the complexity and hard truths that the Gospels and liturgies will hold for the next 6 weeks. Or, you can allow yourself to be immersed in a tough, draining, reflective and soul-changing season which will allow you the unmistakable gift of better recognizing and appreciating the wonder of the Easter story of Christ’s resurrection when we get to it. The choice is yours.

As your priest, I hope you choose wisely. And then I pray that you will commit yourselves to engaging with the entirety of Lent, Holy Week and finally the Paschal Triduum – that great three days that leads us from Jesus’ final Passover meal to Golgotha and the cross to the open and empty tomb. I need you to trust me when I say that Easter Day will make more sense and have so much more meaning if you walk the journey with Jesus in its entirety.

And so, I welcome you to Lent.

For those of you who may wonder how it is that this solemn tone is founded for Lent, I invite you to simply reflect on the very first gospel lesson of the Lenten season. We have just listened to the story of the Temptation of Christ. Jesus has been led, *by the Holy Spirit*, out into the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights. We are told that he was famished and then he was tempted by the tempter or devil.

Think about that 40 nights for a moment. We already know that Jesus was fully human. He had friends. He enjoyed food and drink. We know that once he began his ministry he was almost always surrounded by at least his disciples, if not crowds of people. He broke bread, which was synonymous with eating full meals, on a regular basis. He was even used to having that fortifying drink of wine with his meals. Jesus was not John the Baptist, wandering in the wilderness, living the life of a wandering monk, on purpose. Jesus was a normal person, with a family and a life he was used to living before his Baptism in the Jordan, before the Spirit descended upon him, before God spoke and said, “This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am

well pleased.” Going out into the wilderness was, for Jesus, a completely foreign and previously unknown expectation. He must not have known what to expect. And it would have taken all of his mental and spiritual strength to maintain his sense of purpose and direction.

Those 40 days don't get many actual words in the Gospel but sometimes less is more. Just think about what that short passage tells us. Jesus is tempted by the very one who tempted Adam and Eve. He was tempted by the one who had been messing around in God's world since the beginning of creation. And the temptations themselves were not anything that any human being had ever before faced. Satan tempted the very human Jesus with Jesus' own identity. Essentially, Satan challenged Jesus to claim his fully divine self – to abandon his whole reason for becoming human to save himself from the fact of his humanity... If Jesus had given in and claimed his divine ability to save himself, he would have given up the ability to save all of us. And so, we have here, the very first sacrifice of the divine-self for all of humanity. What Jesus did in the wilderness, refusing to save himself, is an insight into what he will do at the end of the journey which began with his baptism and temptation – that very act that ends our own Lenten season, in the church and in our lives – his sacrifice of his whole self – fully human, fully divine – on the cross.

Jesus began his earthly ministry by not saving himself. He will end his earthly ministry by not saving himself ... all so that he could save us ...

Do you realize that this is exactly what this Lenten season is all about? It is a time in which we acknowledge that we need to be saved. Not “needed”, past tense, but “need”, present tense.

Yes, Jesus did die once and for all on the cross so that we might be saved, once and for all. But that doesn't actually mean that his sacrifice was a static thing that requires no more work. Jesus died on the cross that we might be saved but we have a part to play in all of this. We have not simply had salvation done unto us with you and I as passive recipients, reaping the benefits of an act completed 2000 years ago. That act of salvation has been given to us but we have to actively receive it. It is not enough that we simply sit back and say “oh yeah, thanks Jesus for that awesome gift”. We are called to respond and react to that gift. If we accept the gift, we have to do something about it. Our lives must be changed because of it. They have to be.

During the Easter season and throughout the year, we have many opportunities to show *how* our lives are changed and to live out our lives in ways that express the transformation we have received. But during Lent we are given time, like Jesus in the wilderness, to really take time, to reflect and take stock of who we are as fully human and just what exactly Jesus has given us when he shared with us the gift of his divinity.

We have a choice to make. We can choose to succumb to the temptations to just claim the forgiveness and live as though Jesus' gift, in its entirety, including the cross, is just a given, living our lives with a sense of entitlement and not really considering all that this means. Or we can settle ourselves in to this 40 days and 40

nights that are our Lent – our season of opportunity to both acknowledge the Tempter’s voice calling us to live the easy and unexamined life *and* to tell him “no”, choosing to walk the Lenten wilderness road, open to the difficult path that is your own road to the Cross, but knowing that once you reach the cross, you will also see the Risen Jesus standing before the empty tomb.

If you choose the Lenten path, you will find the Easter journey to be even more powerful, joyous and worthwhile than you could ever have imagined.

But first you must choose the way of Jesus – the way that leads through the temptations and into glory, rather than succumbing to the temptations and never truly knowing the glory at all.