

Maybe you had the chance to start your Lenten season with pancakes and penitence. Perhaps you chose one over the other...but no matter, our journey to Easter is, today, fully launched. Jesus meets the tempter – fresh from his baptism at the hands of cousin John; fresh (in our minds, at least) from a magical moment on the mountaintop with Moses and Elijah. After all this – and with the editor of the gospel reminding us of Jesus human connections – he marches into the wilderness, full of the Spirit...but absolutely bereft of human company or anything remotely edible.

Jesus' forty day fast is challenging and curious to us, unaccustomed as we are to denying ourselves the basic necessities. Not that we don't try. When we're overwhelmed by events (or by the stuff that is our usual pursuit) we take steps to step away. We declutter our houses and try to clear our calendars for the sake of our sanity, but Lent asks us to do that for the sake of our souls. The tempter's role in this wilderness encounter is to muddy the waters – to add confusion; “satisfaction is within reach! Power and glory are yours for the asking – for the taking!” What Jesus is offered is not news to us – the world has been tempting us our whole lives – and often enough we've succumbed to the temptation; we're only human, after all.

But Jesus is sent to blaze a new trail for us; “Follow me!” is his rallying cry. And the manner of our following is on display here in Luke's gospel; chapter four, verses one to thirteen.

The accuser – the slanderer – the tempter...*diabolos* joins us on the journey too. So it has always been. Remember Job, and the notion of the tempter going ‘to and fro on the earth, walking up and down on it...’? Even full of the Spirit, Jesus can't avoid this encounter. Temptation is everywhere; the accuser is *diabolical*.

But the Spirit is also tempting...and we should remember that this encounter comes because of the Spirit's leading.

The temptation described in Luke 4 is toward a particular sin – the sin of forgetting the story of God's providence. We heard in our reading from Deuteronomy (chapter 26: 1-11) the structure of Israel's remembering; come to worship God with gifts – the fruit of the land; and then, remember how you came to be so blessed:

“My father was a wandering Aramean...the Egyptians afflicted us...we cried to the Lord...and He brought us into this place...a land flowing with milk and honey.”

The Exodus story is the foundation of Jewish humanness, and Jesus is every bit a Jewish human. This grand story of providence and protection guides his responses, and models ours:

“One does not live by bread alone...”

“Worship the Lord your God and serve only him...”

“Do not put the Lord your God to the test...”

These represent the bedrock of all faith – the story of all God's people - that the tempter tries to corrupt and unsettle. In Jesus, the impulse of the Spirit proves stronger, and *diabolos* departs until an opportune time.

So what does this mean for us?

While Lent is often the season reminding us of our failure – down to the unfortunate habit of “giving up” chocolate, booze, and other indulgences... you know, the things we think are bad for us – Lent is actually founded on the reminders of the good that God has in mind for us.

We are preparing for the ultimate gift of God – a revelation that walks out of the grave and into a fearless new reality. So Deuteronomy offers a valuable history lesson, and Jesus looks the stunning variety of the world full in the face – food for the asking; power and the illusion of safety for the taking - and says with calm confidence “I choose God.”

Jesus choice to resist the diabolical one does not - in Luke’s gospel - result in instant relief or satisfaction. Mark and Matthew describe ministering angels who arrive at an opportune time; for Luke, the Spirit is satisfaction enough. Full of the Spirit Jesus arrives in the wild, and full of the Spirit he returns to Galilee (Luke 4: 14). What Jesus gets for his troubles is an affirmation that he is not alone. When you consider what is ahead for him, this might be the best gift... ever.

That is the lesson I see offered here at the beginning of Lent. We are surrounded by choices – offers that are good, bad and indifferent to (and for) our well-being. Temptation takes many forms – diabolical and delightful and everything in between. It is easy enough to avoid appearance of trouble – we can drown our sorrows in the sea of self-indulgence; we can build kingdoms for ourselves of influence and opinion; we can insulate ourselves from anything that seems different, and thus cultivate an illusion of “safety”, but only if we imagine that we do not need the kind of company provided by the Spirit of God. That spirit that settles on Jesus at his Baptism – a spirit traced through the majesty of Jesus’ family tree (Luke 3: 23-38) – present since the earliest stirrings of Creation’s story; is the Spirit that us into the future and strengthens us in the present. That Spirit shares the heavy burden of our grief and kindles within us the spark of joy – and faces with us every little thing, each in its own time. That is the lesson of Jesus tempting. That is the gift of God’s infinite grace.