

## Never give in

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the First Sunday in Lent, February 22, 2015.

*He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan... Mark 1:13*

After his baptism in the River Jordan, Jesus goes off into the desert wilderness to prepare for his ministry of preaching, teaching and healing. He needs time alone to test himself to be sure that he will be able to withstand the temptations that will surely come his way. His first temptation is to make a sensation of himself by turning stones into bread that will make him a hero by feeding the hungry of the world. Again he is tempted to perform a circus stunt by jumping off a high place without being harmed. Finally, he is tempted to gain power over all the kingdoms of the world by evil means. In refusing to give in to any of these temptations, Jesus meets the test and is ready to begin his ministry of calling people to repentance and proclaiming the kingdom of God.

All of us at times are tempted to do what we know is wrong and try to rationalize our behavior. We are tempted to love things and use people, to use God's name in condemnation, to sleep in on Sundays, to hurt others by what we say and do, to look out for ourselves to the neglect of others, to economize on the truth and to envy what we can't have.

To be sure, there is no sin in being tempted, only in giving in to it. Jesus was free to make choices and he always chose to do the right and most loving thing in each situation. He was close both to the apostle John and Mary Magdalene, yet people were scandalized by Nikos Kazantzakis' novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ* that suggested that Jesus thought about how he could have chosen to fall in love, get married and raise a family. While he knew that he could have chosen to follow that path, instead he accepted God's call to do the work of proclaiming forgiveness and reconciliation.

Jesus' encounter with the force of evil is about the power of deception. We cannot deny the reality of the forces of evil in the world in the form of those whose love of power is greater than the power to love. If you have ever encountered a demonic personality you know that evil is very real and takes many forms. The author C.S. Lewis tells us of the danger to disbelieve in the power of evil or to think that it poses no real threat to us. All too often evil is disguised in the form of those who appear to be caring who are acting out of good intentions.

We pray in the Lord's Prayer that we not be led into temptation. God delivers us from evil by leading us away from temptation. There are times when we do the right thing for the right reason and still get into trouble. If you have ever been caught in the middle of a dispute between two people, you know what it is like to get clobbered for getting involved as well as being rejected for not getting involved. We must always strive to do the right and loving thing, even if we are rejected. We must never give up doing what is right and good and true.

There is a legend about my namesake, the 14th century Scottish King Robert Bruce who fought an army that was invading his homeland of Scotland. They fought battle after battle and six times they were defeated. His exhausted army was scattered about as Robert wearily sought refuge in a cave and was ready to give up. While he lay there, he watched a spider spinning its web. Six times the spider tried to attach its web from one point to another and each time failed in the effort. Robert knew how discouraged the spider must have felt. He watched as the spider tried once again and on the seventh try, it succeeded in completing its web. He was so inspired by the mighty efforts of this little creature that he got up and went out once more to rally his men to drive back the invading army. This time they were victorious at the battle of Bannockburn and the capture of Stirling Castle. Inspired by a tiny spider, the warrior king never gave up; never gave in.

During World War II when the German Luftwaffe was bombing England, Winston Churchill rallied the English people by encouraging them never to give up. And they never did, much to the consternation of the German forces. Whenever we are faced with temptation to give in, we must never give up.

One of the most useful things we can do in this Lenten season is to take an inventory of our spiritual lives. Just as retail businesses take an inventory to get an accurate count of their stock, so we need to take personal stock of ourselves to assess where

we we've been, where we are and where we are headed. You may not be comfortable with engaging in self-reflection. It is understandable to put off what makes us uncomfortable. The longer we refuse to face reality, the more painful it is. The Latin for pain is poena to mean, "paying the penalty." Taking stock of our spiritual lives and making the necessary changes assures us that we will not have to pay the penalty or lose credibility.

Lent is a time for fasting and feasting. Take a look at those things from which you should fast and feast on what is good and healthy for your soul. For starters:

Fast from being negative and critical and feast on being positive and affirming.

Fast from blaming others and feast on accepting responsibility for yourself.

Fast from reacting impatiently and feast on developing better understanding.

Fast from always talking about your self and feast on listening to others.

In addition to these, make your own list and see how you just might be surprised at how working on them will quite literally change your life for the better.