

Basic Training

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on the First Sunday in Lent, February 14, 2016 .

When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time. Luke 4:13

Before he begins his ministry, Jesus has to undergo his basic training. He intentionally subjects himself to powerful temptations in preparation for resisting their terrible power. The traditional site of this training took place in the very barren wilderness of Judea where there is little sign of life. The only other place I have seen that looks like a moonscape is in the Badlands of South Dakota.

If you have ever been completely alone for a long time, the isolation gets to you. While on a camping trip in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, my companions went on a hike while I remained behind in camp. It was very peaceful at first. As time passed, knowing there was not a living soul around for miles, the silence and the isolation began to get to me. I longed for the sight or sound of another human being. It made me realize how as social creatures we depend on each other for survival.

The Scriptures tell us that Jesus spent forty days by himself fasting in the wilderness. No human being could last that long without food or water. Forty is actually a biblical number to mean a very long time. If we go for too long on an empty stomach, it becomes increasingly difficult if not impossible to concentrate. There have been those like Mahatma Gandhi who have gone without food for twenty days and survived while others on hunger strikes have gone for thirty days have not survived. Fasting has practical use as a discipline for the body and for the mind and spirit as well. Jesus refrains from eating to discipline himself to withstand the temptations of bodily desires.

His encounter with the devil is real. You may find it hard to believe in the personification of evil in the form of the devil or Satan. The Irish born author C.S. Lewis tells us that the devil wants us to believe that he is only imaginary. In whatever form it takes, few would dispute the reality of evil. The morning newspapers and the nightly news attest to the fact that the power of evil wreaks havoc. No one is immune to it. The temptations of Jesus are examples of evil intent cleverly disguised as goodness.

In his famished state, Jesus is first tempted to satisfy his hunger by turning stones into bread. Realizing that he is near starvation, the devil seizes the opportunity to tempt him with the promise of power to satisfy not only his own hunger, but to relieve world hunger. The temptation to eliminate starvation under the guise of benevolence would make Jesus an overnight sensation, a hero to the oppressed and starving people everywhere. By refusing to make a sensation of himself, Jesus counters his first temptation by quoting from the Book of Deuteronomy: One does not live by bread alone.

Again Jesus is tempted to make a spectacle of himself by performing a stunt. He can jump from the parapet of the temple in Jerusalem without harm. Such a stunt would catch the attention and imagination of the world and give him worldwide prominence. Of course, all this would be at the price of giving himself over to the power of the Evil One. While he trusts in God's power, he will not exploit it. He refuses to mislead people by making a sensation of himself. Once more he quotes from Deuteronomy: Do not put the Lord your God to the test.

For his final temptation, Jesus is told that he can have authority over all the kingdoms of the world if he will bow down to the power of the Evil One. With such a position of power, Jesus can liberate whole nations living under the oppression. He realizes freeing people living under dictatorial rulers would be at the price of forfeiting his life to the power of Evil. Again, Jesus draws on the Scripture: Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.

After his time of testing, Jesus realizes that he has the inner resources to withstand any temptation. He knows he has the will to resist any form of evil and that will inevitably appear again at an opportune time. He faced down the same temptations we have. It was only with God's power working in him that he is able to resist such powerful temptations. That same power to resist temptations works in us. To be sure, there is no sin in being tempted, only in giving in to it.

These traditional forty days of Lent are a time to face up to our own temptations. As Jesus discovered within himself the power to resist, we use this time to build up resistance to temptations of pride, hypocrisy and self-indulgence. We must never give in to the temptation to exploit and take advantage of others for personal gain. Too often we find ourselves loving things and using people, instead of the other way around. When encountering those more fortunate than us, we resist succumbing to envy and jealousy by rejoicing with them. We resist the temptation to lay blame on others by accepting responsibility for our own actions.

This morning, little Colette is becoming our newest member of the Church. All she knows is the love of her parents. She will have to learn about many other things, some pleasant and some not so pleasant in today's real world. She will have to learn how to resist temptations that come her way. Being an active part of the faith community of the church will help her learn all that is right and good and true.

It is by God's grace and love that Jesus forgave his persecutors and those who nailed him to the cross. It is also the power of God's grace that raised him from the dead. It is a difficult and complex world in which we live. As we make our way through life, we can be sure that the power of God's love is greater and more constant than anything else.