

## **Luke 4: 1-13**

**LENT ROLLS AROUND EVERY YEAR, BUT FOR MOST CHRISTIANS, IT IS LESS LIKE A BIRTHDAY AND MORE LIKE A FLU VACCINE. WE KNOW LENT IS NECESSARY, THAT IT'S GOOD FOR US IN MUCH THE SAME WAY SPINACH IS. LENT IS HARD TO EXPLAIN TO OUR NON-CHRISTIAN/NON-CHURCH-GOING FRIENDS, BECAUSE TO TELL THE TRUTH, WE DON'T FULLY UNDERSTAND IT OURSELVES.**

**SOME PEOPLE CUT OUT CHOCOLATE, LAY OFF RED MEAT, MAYBE STOP DRINKING CARBONATED DRINKS FOR FORTY DAYS. TO AN OUTSIDER, IT LOOKS MORE LIKE A DIET.**

**EACH YEAR WHEN THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT ARRIVES, WE WATCH JESUS WANDER OFF INTO THE WILDERNESS.**

**A WILDERNESS OF TESTING, OF TEMPTATION. A WILDERNESS SHOWDOWN WITH ANOTHER VOICE, THIS ONE, NOT SO HOLY. "SO YOU ARE THE SON OF GOD, HMMMM? LET'S SEE WHAT KIND OF SON OF GOD YOU WILL BE, JESUS." AND THAT IS HOW JESUS BEGAN HIS MINISTRY. JESUS BEGAN HIS MINISTRY, HIS WAY OF BEING GOD-WITH-US, ALONE IN THE WILDERNESS, FIGHTING, TESTING AND TEMPTATION.**

**INDEED, THIS WHOLE SEASON OF LENT AND ITS PRACTICES MIGHT NOT BE WHAT SOME OF US EXPECT OR, FRANKLY, WANT FROM CHURCH. SOME OF US COME TO WORSHIP TO BE UPLIFTED AND TO HEAR WORDS OF GRACE AND ASSURANCE. MANY FOLKS COME TO WORSHIP TO PUSH ALL THE NEGATIVITY OF THE WORLD ASIDE, EVEN IF IT IS ONLY FOR AN HOUR.**

**AND WHILE ALL THOSE REASONS FOR BEING IN WORSHIP ARE VALID AND UNDERSTANDABLE, DURING THIS SEASON OF LENT OUR FOCUS IS A BIT DIFFERENT THAN PRIMARILY NOURISHMENT AND COMFORT. FOR THE NEXT FORTY DAYS WE WALK WITH JESUS TO THE CROSS.**

**AN EPISCOPAL CHURCH LOCATED IN A SOUTH CAROLINA COASTAL TOWN DECIDED TO PUT UP THREE CROSSES ON THE LAWN OF THEIR CHURCH. THEY DRAPED THE CROSSES IN PURPLE FOR LENT. AFTER A COUPLE WEEKS, THE CHURCH RECEIVED A CALL FROM SOME LOCAL BUSINESSPEOPLE. "THIS IS A BIG SEASON FOR TOURISTS," THEY COMPLAINED. "WE THINK THOSE CROSSES COULD SEND THE WRONG SIGNAL TO VISITORS ON THE BEACH. PEOPLE DON'T WANT TO COME DOWN HERE FOR A VACATION AND BE COMFRONTED WITH SUCH UNPLEASANTNESS." THE CROSSES STAYED, BUT THE RUMBLING CONTINUED.**

**A FEW YEARS LATER THE EPISCOPAL PRIEST FROM THAT CHURCH VISITED A CHURCH IN FLORIDA. IT WAS THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT. HE FOUND THE SERVICE TO BE A VERY MOVING EXPERIENCE, WITH APPROPRIATE LENTEN INTENSITY. BUT AT THE END OF THE**

SERVICE, A MEMBER OF THE CHURCH APPROACHED HIM. "I REGRET THAT YOU HAD TO VISIT US DURING LENT," WHISPERED THE MEMBER. "THIS IS NOT A FAIR REPRESENTATION OF OUR CHURCH, WITH THESE DULL HYMNS. NORMALLY THINGS ARE MUCH MORE UPBEAT." THOUGH THE PRIEST HAD EXPERIENCED THE WORSHIP AS POWERFUL AND TRUTH-TELLING, SOME OF THE CHURCH MEMBERS THOUGHT OF IT AS A DOWNER AND A BIT EMBARRASSING.

LENT IS A STRANGE SEASON. WORSHIP MAY FEEL DRAINING, A LITTLE HEAVEY, A LITTLE TOO HONEST. THERE IS ALSO THE POSSIBILITY YOU MAY NOT ALWAYS LEAVE FEELING BETTER THAN WHEN YOU ARRIVED.

WHAT WE WOULD DO WELL TO REMEMBER IS THIS: THESE FORTY DAYS (PLUS SUNDAYS) FROM ASH WEDNESDAY TO EASTER ARE AMONG THE MOST COUNTERCULTURAL DAYS IN THE ENTIRE CHURCH YEAR. IN A CULTURE DRIVEN BY WORSHIPPING SUCCESS, SEEKING POWER, AND MEETING ONE'S OWN NEEDS NO MATTER WHO ELSE GETS HURT, THE SEASON OF LENT PURPOSEFULLY TAKES US IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION, IN A MORE HONEST DIRECTION.

THOSE WHO CELEBRATE LENT OFTEN MISTAKE TEMPTATION FOR THE STUFF WE KNOW IS WRONG BUT WE ARE DRAWN TO ALL THE SAME. BUT GOAL OF THE SEASON IS TO HELP US RECOGNIZE THE MORE POTENT TOOLS OF THE TEMPTER...THE TEMPTATIONS THAT DON'T LOOK LIKE TEMPTATION UNTIL WE SEE THEM IN THE REARVIEW MIRROR. THE TEMPTATIONS THAT ARE THE MOST DANGEROUS ARE THE ONES THAT SOUND RATHER GOOD. THE TEMPTATIONS PLAYED OUT ON THE ROAD PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS. WHEN WE ARE LED BY OUR OWN WISDOM, WHEN WE ARE LED BY OUR OWN DESIRE, WHEN WE ARE TEMPTED TO TAKE SHORTCUTS, WE WILL ALWAYS FIND OURSELVES VULNERABLE. NO ONE IS EXEMPT FROM THE POWER OF THE TEMPTER. THE DEVIL DOESN'T SHOW UP AS A SERPENT OFFERING FRUIT; THERE IS NO RED SPANDEX AND PITCHFORK...IN OTHER WORDS, THE DEVIL DOESN'T ANNOUNCE HIMSELF. TEMPTATION DOESN'T WEAR A NAMETAG.

THE ONLY VACCINE TO TEMPTATION IS OBEDIENCE. JESUS' ESCAPE FROM SATAN IS NOT A MATTER OF WEIGHING THE PROS AND CONS AND MAKING THE BEST DECISION; IT IS A WILLFUL CHOICE TO SUBMIT TO GOD. AGAIN AND AGAIN AND AGAIN.

SO WHILE OUR LENTEN WORSHIP MIGHT NOT MAKE US FEEL GOOD EACH SUNDAY, IT WILL MAKE US *FEEL*. IT WILL MAKE US *THINK*. IT WILL MAKE US, AT LEAST FOR A BIT ON A SUNDAY MORNING, *REEXAMINE* WHO WE REALLY ARE—NOT WHO WE HOPE OTHERS THINK WE ARE...BUT WHO WE ARE CONTINUALLY BEING INVITED TO BECOME AS CHILDREN OF GOD. LOOK AGAIN AT WHAT HAPPENED TO JESUS IN THE WILDERNESS:

JESUS HAD BEEN IN THE WILDERNESS FOR A LONG TIME, AND HE WAS FAMISHED. SO THE VOICE CHALLENGED HIM TO USE HIS POWER TO MEET HIS OWN NEEDS, TO ENSURE HIS OWN

**SURVIVAL. "IT'S NOT A BIG DEAL. JUST TURN THESE STONES INTO A LITTLE BREAD. YOU WILL TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF, AND YOU WON'T REALLY HURT ANYBODY ELSE EITHER." BUT IN RESPONSE, JESUS COUNTERED WITH WORDS FROM DEUTERONOMY.**

**THE VOICE TRIED AGAIN AND UPPED THE STAKES. THIS TIME SATAN TEMPTED JESUS TO USE GOD FOR HIS OWN NEEDS. JESUS COULD PROVE HE WAS WHO HE WAS HE WAS WITH JUST ONE SIMPLE MOVE. AND IT WOULD BE EASY. JESUS WOULD JUMP, THE ANGELS WOULD RESCUE HIM, AND THE CROWD WOULD BE AMAZED. TEST GOD JUST A LITTLE TO SEE IF GOD'S PROMISES REALLY WORKED.**

**BUT JESUS AGAIN SAID NO. HE REFUSED TO MANIPULATE GOD, TO TREAT GOD AS HIS SERVANT.**

**SATAN TRIED ONE MORE TIME, PULLING OUT ALL THE STOPS. SATAN TEMPTED JESUS TO USE HIS POWER TO ESTABLISH A POLITICAL EMPIRE GROUNDED IN THE WAYS OF THE WORLD. THE EVIL ONE TEMPTED JESUS TO GRASP THE GOLDEN RING, TO SIMPLY SKIP ALL THE UNPLEASANT STUFF OF SACRIFICE AND STRUGGLE. SKIP IT ALL.**

**JUST TAKE DOWN THOSE CROSSES OFF THE CHURCH LAWN. JUST CUT OUT THE DEPRESSING HYMNS. INSTEAD OF TALKING ABOUT SATAN AND TEMPTATION, PLEASE TALK ABOUT HELPFUL LIFE TOPICS. KEEP US NUMB SO WE WON'T ASK THE HARD QUESTIONS ABOUT GOD'S FAITHFULNESS AND OUR CALLING TO FOLLOW JESUS. PEOPLE DON'T WANT TO HEAR ABOUT SELF SACRIFICE. THEY WANT TO LEAVE THE CONCERNS OF THE WORLD OUT THERE; DON'T LET THEM SEEP INTO THE SANCTUARY. LET THIS BE AN HOUR OF POSITIVE THINKING, NOT ABOUT OUR SIN. ONLY PREACH ABOUT VICTORY AND POWER AND BLESSING.**

**BUT EACH TIME JESUS SAID NO. JESUS SAID NO TO FOLLOWING THE WAY OF THIS WORLD. HE WAS OBEDIENT TO GOD.**

**WILL WE HAVE THE COURAGE TO MAKE SUCH COUNTERCULTURAL RESPONSES? WHEN TEMPTED TO SHRINK DOWN THE GOSPEL IN ORDER TO JUSTIFY SERVING ONLY OURSELVES, WHAT WILL WE DECIDE? WHEN FACED WITH PLEADING WITH GOD TO ACT, WILL WE TRY TO TELL GOD HOW AND WHEN AND WHERE TO ANSWER OUR PLEAS? WHEN FACED WITH PROMIEES OF SUCCESS AND POWER, EVEN IF GETTING IT CAUSES A LITTLE BIT OF US TO DIE, WHAT WILL WE DO? THERE ARE PLACES GOD INTENDS TO TAKE US THAT WE WOULD NEVER GO IF LEFT TO OUR OWN DEVICES. IN THE DESERT WILDERNESS, JESUS CHOOSES OBEDIENCE. MAY GOD GRANT US THE GRACE TO DO THE SAME..TO CHOOSE WHO WE WILL BE AND WHOSE WE WILL BE. IN THE WILDERNESS OF THIS HOLY SEASON, AND WHEREEVER THE ROAD TAKES US. AMEN.**



**HEAVENLY FATHER, WE PRAY FOR ALL THOSE WHO ARE FACED WITH TEMPTATIONS OR TRIALS THAT SEEM TOO GREAT FOR THEM. KEEP ALL YOUR PEOPLE STRONG IN THE FACE OF TEMPTATION, TEACH US ALL TO RELY ON YOU AT DARK TIMES OF ATTACK, AND LET YOUR WORD BE OUR ONLY STRENGTH. LORD IN YOUR MERCY**

**WE PRAY FOR THOSE WHOSE FAITH IS FRAGILE, THAT THEY MAY BE STRENGTHENED AGAINST THE TEMPTATION OF UNBELIEF. HELP US TO SUPPORT EACH OTHER AT MOMENTS OF WEAKNESS AND GIVE US THE STRENGTH TO STAND STRONG FOR OTHERS. SUPPORT ALL BELIEVERS, WITHOUT LETTING THEM BE PUT TO SHAME FOR THEIR BELIEFS. LORD IN YOUR MERCY**

**STAND BY ALL THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED EITHER IN MIND OR BODY THAT THEY MAY NOT BE TEMPTED TO DESPAIR. KEEP THOSE WHO ARE STRUGGLING WITH ILLNESS STRONG IN THEIR FAITH, SO THAT THEY MAY DRAW THEIR STRENGTH FROM YOU. WE ESPECIALLY PRAY FOR YOUR HEALING HAND OVER...**

**HEAVENLY FATHER, RECEIVE THE PRAYERS OF YOUR CHILDREN. FREE US FROM ALL EVIL, SO THAT WE MAY SERVE YOU IN PEACE AND JOY; THROUGH JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD, WHO LIVES AND REIGNS WITH YOU AND THE HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD, NOW AND FOREVER**