

Empowered for the Struggle
A Sermon on Luke 4:1-13 by the Rev. Philip Major
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Today is the first Sunday of Lent. The name 'Lent', comes from the natural world. In the northern hemisphere the days are lengthening. Lent is our modern version of the old English word describing the season of lengthening days. Lent is the season of preparation for the most important day of the year, the day of the Resurrection, Easter.

We begin this season of preparation where Jesus began. *After his baptism, Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."* With this and other questions the devil tempted Jesus. This passage guides us as disciples of Jesus on three levels.

The first level of guidance is the one that is most obvious in the text. We are guided to not give in to the kinds of temptations described in the passage. In the first test presented to Jesus, the devil is trying to get Jesus to rely on the quick fix for his hunger. Jesus' disciples follow his example by solving problems in ways that provide long-term solutions, not a quick fix.

In the second test, the devil tries to get Jesus to gain power or claim power by demonstrating allegiance to him, that is, to the devil. Jesus' disciples aren't supposed to be giving our allegiance to anyone, except God. As Christians we shouldn't be bending the knee, or kissing the ring of the dear leader or the mob boss. It's wrong to gain power through devious or deceitful means. It's wrong to claim power that doesn't rightfully belong to us.

In the third test, the devil tries to get Jesus to abuse his relationship with God. This temptation pretends to be about placing our trust in God. But the devil isn't encouraging Jesus to place his trust in God; he's trying to get Jesus to abuse his relationship with God. The devil even takes the words of scripture and uses them to try to get Jesus to do the wrong thing. The devil is tempting Jesus to abuse the words of scripture in order to hurt other people.

The arrangement of these three temptations is not arbitrary. In the Gospel of Luke, this third temptation is the most treacherous of all, the temptation of abusing scripture and abusing power and relationships that are seen to be given to us by God. As we look at events in the world today, and at the history of the church, we see this is true. Many of the worst mistakes of Jesus' disciples involve the abuse of the words of scripture to hurt other people, and the abuse of power and authority by pastors, priests and bishops to hurt other people.

You and I are not especially surprised Jesus did not succumb to any of these temptations, even though he was delirious with hunger. One of the things that was helpful for Jesus was that he had a good understanding of the Hebrew scriptures. It was helpful for Jesus to be able to remember that passage from Deuteronomy, "One does not live by bread alone, but by all of the words given to us by God." Jesus spent time learning about scripture and thinking about scripture, and it made him stronger, and more resistant to temptations.

How about for us? Do we know the scriptures well enough so they can guide us in our daily lives and help us resist temptations? Do we feel we would succumb to the kinds of temptations described in our Gospel passage? Do we work on long-term solutions to problems? Do we give our allegiance to human leaders, acting in fear of them as if they are the head of the mafia? Do we attempt to gain power through clever or deceitful means? Do we use our relationships with God, or the words of scripture in ways that hurt other people?

It's true that each one of us is tempted to make mistakes, and sometimes we make very big mistakes. But I want to remind us that Jesus, as he is portrayed in the Gospels, is mostly concerned

about sins that involve us hurting other people. Those who have the most power have the power to commit the worst sins, and those with very little power, such as young children and the poor, have much less capacity to sin. So Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor, for the kingdom of God belongs to them." Jesus says, "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it."

If you are not the kind of person who pledges allegiance to the dear leader, or who abuses the words of scripture to hurt other people, I suggest this passage is relevant for us on a second level. This is a story about the conflict between right and wrong, the conflict between good and evil. This is a story about our role in conflicts between good and evil.

The first thing to acknowledge is that there is a fight, there is a conflict between right and wrong. Jesus tries to do the right thing, which is to heal the people, to serve the people, to feed the people, and to invite all of the people to be members of God's family. Jesus took care of the people. This was the right thing to do. But Jesus' work and Jesus' use of the gifts given to him by God was threatening to the religious establishment, so they pressed charges against him and succeeded in having him put to death.

It was true for Jesus, and it's true for the people of Ukraine, and it's true for you and me. There is always a fight between good and evil. The struggle never ends, not until the coming of God's kingdom.

Let's notice that Jesus is not the one who initiates the conflict, and yet Jesus finds himself in the middle of a fight. I'm pretty sure the same thing is true for you. People who are following Jesus do not go around picking fights and starting wars and creating conflicts in their churches and other organizations. Yet we find ourselves in the middle of a fight. It is a fight between right and wrong. Our responsibility is to make sure we are choosing to support the right side.

It's not always easy to choose the right side in the struggle. During the Civil War, one of Abraham Lincoln's advisors said something to the effect of, "God is on our side in the fight." Lincoln replied, "Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right."

After we have carefully considered the motivations and goals of each side in the fight, our next task is to decide what our role will be. Our task is to choose the way we will approach the conflict. In our Gospel passage Jesus makes some choices. Jesus could have attempted to destroy his enemy; he does not. Jesus could have made some supernatural display of his power; he does not. In this passage and in the whole story of his life, Jesus makes use of his vulnerability. Jesus is willing to be vulnerable. Vulnerability is his greatest power.

The same thing is true for you and me. We find ourselves in the middle of a fight between right and wrong. Our first and most important task is to choose the right side in the conflict. Our second task is to maintain our ability to be vulnerable, and to use our vulnerability for the sake of doing the right thing.

Today's Gospel passage offers us a third level of guidance for us as disciples of Christ. Let's return to that first verse of our passage: *After his baptism, Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness.*

Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit. Jesus was led by the Spirit. This was the starting point for Jesus as he was tempted by the devil. I want this to be your starting point today, and tomorrow and the next day. I want you to begin each day, feeling that you are led by the Holy Spirit.

The problem, as Lincoln would remind us, is whether we are able to know when we are being led by the Holy Spirit, as opposed to when we are just feeling self-confident, or perhaps when we've had a little extra caffeine. Any fool can feel a little extra confident, or drink a little extra caffeine.

We learn more about the Holy Spirit, and the feeling of being led by the Holy Spirit from Jesus. Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit and was led to be more vulnerable. Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit and was led to care for the sick and give food to the poor and invite those who had been excluded to

join in the banquet. Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit and was led to act with mercy and loving kindness. Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit and was filled with energy to persevere in doing the right thing.

I pray it will be this way for you and for me. I pray that we would find ourselves being led by the Holy Spirit, that we would be empowered to persevere in doing the right thing, that we would be empowered to act with mercy and loving kindness, that we would be empowered to care for the poor and the sick, that we would be empowered to be vulnerable, and to use the power of our vulnerability for the sake of God's kingdom.

So we are empowered by God's word in our lives. We are empowered to be aware of the worst temptations. We are empowered to choose the right side in the struggle, the side of mercy and compassion. We seek to be led by the Holy Spirit, thus empowered to persevere in doing right.