

Sermon for Monday, February 2, 2015  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
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Forty days and forty nights  
thou wast fasting in the wild;  
forty days and forty nights  
tempted, and yet undefiled.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent,  
and, somewhat ironically,  
also Valentine's Day.  
A season of that is traditionally marked  
by fasting and prayer  
and here we are on a day  
that features love  
and chocolate.  
Thankfully  
the Sundays during Lent  
are technically in Lent but not of it,  
so we can feel free to indulge today!

But back to Lent.  
This is a season  
that has been traditionally associated  
with deprivation.  
Giving up things,  
being solemn,  
limiting  
celebration.

Should not we thy sorrow share  
and from worldly joys abstain,  
fasting with unceasing prayer,  
strong with thee to suffer pain?

It begins with ashes  
smeared on our heads,  
and continues through Good Friday, where we sit and watch a man  
dying on the cross.

But that is the story of Good Friday,  
the end of Jesus's physical life and ministry  
here on earth.

Today, we are still at the beginning of Lent,  
still at the beginning of Jesus's  
adult life and ministry.

Forty days and forty nights.  
That's how it all begins,  
this work that Jesus has come to do.  
He hasn't even preached a sermon yet,  
or performed a miracle;  
he hasn't even called his disciples.  
It's just the beginning, with Jesus, alone,  
getting ready to do the work of God.  
And as much as anything, it's a time of waiting.  
Like pregnancy,  
that inevitable and almost painful  
watching  
for something to be born,  
a mixture of anticipation and struggle.

But what will be born  
is the kingdom of God,  
and what happens during that waiting  
determines what sort of kingdom  
it will be.

Like all waiting  
there's a temptation  
to rush things.  
To take a short cut,  
to get things over and done with early,  
to begin on what we perceive to be  
the real business of life.  
And that was as much a temptation for Jesus  
as it is for us.

Three times the temptations came. The temptations were not so much personal, things that would bring glory to him, as just quick and easy ways to achieve something like what he had been sent to do. Three times he struggled with a short cut to get about his work. Three times he was forced to question what it meant to be going about God's business, as he waited there in the desert, as good as helpless.

The first temptation sounds so practical. Look around you . . . see the desert. Dirt and dirt and stones. Perhaps the odd spindly bush, but then more dirt and more stones as far as you can see. Dirt and stones, no good for anyone or anything.

But just imagine, just imagine if they were loaves of bread. Free for the taking, like manna from heaven. There would be no hunger any more. People would be fed. And they would hail you as the great provider . . . Imagine. . . bread for the world. Just turn these stones into bread.

“But,” Jesus says, “we do not live by bread alone.”

And then there is the second temptation.  
The Judean desert is wild,  
full of high cliffs and deep gullies.  
The view from the heights  
can be astounding.  
Small dots of white,  
goats standing at the edge  
of unimaginable precipices.  
And if you look in the right direction  
perhaps you can glimpse  
a patch  
of blue,  
the dead sea,  
useless to drink  
but rich in minerals.  
Stand up high, and imagine,  
imagine all this  
is yours. No more battles, no more wars,  
just one ruler, a benevolent empire.  
It's attractive, so attractive.  
Take political control,  
free the oppressed.  
As long as the end is right  
it doesn't matter how you get there.  
A little compromise,  
a little coercion; surely peace  
is worth any price.

Imagine. . . freedom and peace.  
Just give in for a moment  
to evil.

“But,” Jesus says, “worship God, and serve him only.”

And the third temptation.  
Jerusalem is closer to the desert than you might think.  
Go out the Lion Gate and cross the valley of Gethsemane  
and then walk on up the hill until you reach the top  
of the Mount of Olives.  
One way

you can see city walls  
 and above them  
 the Dome of the Rock  
 standing above  
 Temple Mount,  
 turn around  
 and you look out into the desert.

The journey up from Jericho to Jerusalem was hard for pilgrims,  
 uphill all the way.  
 And when they reached the Mount of Olives,  
 that first sight of the temple  
 was a sign of hope  
 for exhausted travelers.

Stand up there, high above the city.  
 Take a step too far,  
 lean forward a little,  
 let the dizziness take hold.  
 And fall.  
 God won't desert you . . .  
 if you're really the one who is to come,  
 there will be no bloody body,  
 just a swoop of angels.  
 Proof that God really does do miracles, plain for everyone to see. There will be no  
 doubts.  
 Every one  
 will believe.

Imagine . . . incontestable religious proof.  
 Just a small step. Just one.

“But,” Jesus says, “do not put God  
 to the test.”

And they were over.  
 Three temptations,  
 temptations not  
 to do wrong,  
 not even to be self-indulgent.

But temptations to do good,  
to make the world a simpler, more straightforward,  
and too all appearances,  
better,  
place.

Temptations to rush things.  
To take short cuts,  
to get things over and done with early,  
to begin on the real  
business of life.

Except for the cost.  
You see, there is small print  
at the bottom of all these temptations.  
Each of them  
is to do good,  
each of them is even possible.  
But each of them  
would mean  
Jesus abandoning the way  
that has been laid before him.  
Taking the easy way  
instead of the way of suffering,  
Taking the easy way  
instead of the way of death.  
Turning his back on God  
in order to do the work of God.

And it doesn't work.  
Jesus knew it  
as well as we do.  
Sometimes  
there is no easy way.

You see,  
if Jesus had taken the easy way,  
the way of the temptations,  
there might have been bread for all, for then;  
there might have been peace; there might even have been unassailable, incontestable  
proof for faith.

But we'd still be stuck  
with our own inherent tendency to do wrong,  
we'd still be stuck  
with the certainty of death  
and no promise of anything beyond it;  
we'd still be stuck  
with God up there in his heaven, and us here on earth  
with no way of bridging the gap;  
we'd still be stuck.

But we're not.  
Because Jesus turned his back on easy bread.  
Because Jesus turned his back on easy power.  
Because Jesus turned his back on spectacular miracles.  
He walked back into the desert to wait,  
to prepare,  
for the work  
that God had for him to do.

And that preparation led him  
on a journey through Israel,  
a journey of preaching and healing and loving,  
a journey of friendship and opposition,  
a journey,  
eventually  
to Jerusalem one Passover week,  
to an upper room where he shared his body and blood,  
to a cross  
where he hung in agony  
to die,  
to a stone cold tomb  
where his body  
lay broken  
to rot.

And then, against all expectation, all hope, all belief,  
it led him  
out of that very same tomb,  
to life.  
Glorious, unstoppable, unimaginable

life.

It was a long journey.

And we have a journey ahead of us too.  
Lent is just beginning, and for the next six weeks  
we will join Jesus in his desert waiting.

We would like, most of us, to skip Lent,  
and especially the difficult part of Good Friday,  
to go straight to Easter.  
Back to chocolate and red meat whenever you want it  
and a life of fun and self indulgence.  
But, you know, if we do that  
we are more than likely  
to get stuck. Get stuck in the habits  
that keep sneaking up  
and dragging us down.  
Stuck in the ever-present craziness  
that demands we fill every second of our day with busyness.  
Stuck in a life  
that has no room  
for what is most important,  
and no room  
for God.

Lent is a gift. It might not seem like it; we don't like waiting. But Lent is a time  
when we are reminded  
that we need to pay attention to our lives,  
and pay attention to our souls.  
It's when we can justifiably make excuses  
not to over-indulge, to listen to our bodies  
and eat more simply.  
It's when we can look at our habits,  
and question whether  
they really reflect who we are and what is important.  
It's when we can think carefully  
what our priorities are,  
and choose  
what we want, what we need

to do.

It's when we can take a little extra time  
to pray, to sit quietly with God.  
Lent is a gift, a gift of time.

Because there is an order about it, a rhythm, that reminds us  
who we are as human beings  
created by a God  
who loves us more  
than even the dearest  
Valentine.

And so, in this Lenten time  
we sit with Jesus  
out in the wilderness,  
preparing, waiting.

Waiting to see God at work in the world. Waiting for God to lead us. Waiting, not  
rushing in to do things the easy way. Waiting  
for resurrection.

Keep, O keep us, Savior dear,  
ever constant by thy side;  
that we thee we may appear  
at the eternal Eastertide.