

SERMON - THE 1<sup>st</sup> SUNDAY IN LENT – 5 MARCH 2017

St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

Father Mark Menees, D.D.

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First Sunday in Lent

I Cor. 6:1ff

Matthew 4:1ff

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen+

Around December in our house there are a set of “traditions” we follow. One of those is to watch a movie titled, “The Christmas Story”. It is about a young boy named Ralphie, who growing up in Gary Indiana has as his heart’s desire a special gift. He wants a Red Ryder, 100 shot, carbine action, BB Gun with a compass in the stock for Christmas. Nothing else even remotely competes with this trophy. The entire story revolves around his attempts to figure out how to make this happen, while his mother, his teacher, and even the department store Santa tell him, No, you can’t have one. “You’ll shoot your eye out” is the refrain at every effort he puts forward. In the end, however, Dad comes through and he gets what he thinks he really wants. So, with a satisfied mind and look on his face he goes outside on the snowy morning to try out his magnificent toy. As luck or fate would have it, the very first shot ricochets off a tin sign and BINGO-right into his glasses and breaks the lens. The narrator, who is Ralphie as an adult, comments, “just at the height of our revelry, at the zenith of our joy, when all seems most right with the world, the unthinkable happens!”

The Gospel of Matthew for this first Sunday in our Lenten journey, reports that Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness of Judea to be tempted. But remember, this is on the heels of his Baptism by John in the Jordan. He has just been “ordained” to his role as Messiah and heard the voice of God say, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well Pleased, (literally overjoyed) and now he is compelled to go to the most desolate place in his homeland to wander and to confront his own desires and hopes. And he will face what must appear to be insurmountable pressures from others, even his friends, to do and be what in his deepest soul he knows he cannot. When all seems most right with the world, the unthinkable happens.

There are 2 vitally important aspects of St. Matthew’s account that we should inwardly digest. First, this text echoes a crucial piece of history, the wanderings of Israel for 40 years after being set free from slavery, and Moses’ 40 days on Sinai. In the life of the People of God that time in the wilderness left them afflicted with hunger and thirst. It left them wondering where and when will we find a place to live, to worship, and to flourish. It forced back upon them questions about their relationship to one another, and even more to the God who had set them free, given them manna, and rescued them from death. But second, it also foretells something about us. It points to the reality that everyone here today and even those not, move in a world that is often a deserted place and wilderness where we must travel and face a question; what is our heart’s truest desire?! What is it that is so important to us that without it we cannot be whole or survive?

This story exposes a set of temptations for us to view and consider, and make no mistake for they are not nearly as trivial as they seem. But that is true for many of our temptations isn’t it? It is not the thing itself (the extra chocolate, or bourbon, or clothing, or money), that is so much the problem as what the temptation represents. There is a tendency for all of us to see things, achievements, or pleasure as the true goal of life. But that is an illusion. In fact the word in Greek for tempt is peirazein, which literally means: to distort the truth. It makes something appear more valuable than it really is, and makes the truly valuable seem less so. (By the way, this is one of the names the N.T. uses for Satan!!)

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So Jesus enters the wilderness, and does it our behalf. He literally descends into the hell of human existence with its confusion and hunger in order to know who we are fully. His entire life journey was such a wandering in our wilderness, and yet he kept clear his life's mission.

Now Satan comes to him in his human hunger and lightly suggest--turn these stones into bread—it's really small potatoes; nothing too glitzy, if you are the Son of God. But our Lord realizes what is really at stake; allowing personal pleasure to become the driving force in a moment of need. And is it not easy for our world to throw such challenges at God? Give me what I want and I will believe in you is really what is being suggested. The same taunt will be heard on Good Friday—Come Down From the Cross and We Will Believe in You. So much of the current “success gospel” is grounded in just this perspective. If God loves me then He will see I succeed and am rewarded. But what happens if God’s view of success looks like a cross rather than wealth? Just when all seems most right with the world, the unthinkable happens!

The next temptation is more insidious. Throw yourself off the pinnacle of the holiest place, the temple, and let's see what happens. But again it is not about the safety of Jesus, or even a little entertainment for the real question here is simple—Is God REAL? Is God good or do we have to invent that for ourselves? This debate between Jesus and the Evil One is about **WHO God** really is. Is God the one that must prove Himself? The tempting of God is about rebellion. In the wilderness Israel asked, “Is the Lord among us or not?” To put it into language to which we are more accustomed, are we to believe in God if we do not receive what *we judge* as fitting? Are we to answer to Scripture’s perspective about the human condition or do we decide to change what we do not like, find disquieting, or that interferes with our way of living? (I had a fascinating conversation with a person recently who stated quite honestly, “I will encounter and hear the parts of scripture I agree with and ignore the rest”. I simply asked (and ask us as well), “Are we willing to have our views and actions challenged by the fullness of holy writ, and if not, then why bother to read it all?”) Luther once commented that, “we have learned to serve ourselves in all things; even in God”.

The final edition of our episode is the trip to a high mountain where all the world can be seen in its glory. Worship me, i.e. declare me as the most worthy thing of your attention, commitment, and adoration and I will give all this to you. Those of us who know the end of the story know that from another elevation Jesus both saves the world and then is raised to hold it. By saying NO to Satan he was saying YES to his mission. But for now, the real challenge in this temptation is power and possessions. It has to do with the sense of being absolutely secure and capable of total independence. Is reality constructed of materialism? Is what you and I most value and want in life political, religious, or personal power and control? Or is it to be in relationships that add an un-measurable and immeasurable quality to our lives? Is it to see that sheer power can never deliver the sense that we are truly loved and held by the eternal?

These temptations are real. And their danger to us is they become our hearts truest desire rather than GOD. It is very interesting that the “Propers” for Ash Wednesday hold part of what Christ has placed in our hands as means of facing them. The Gospel for that first day of Lent is from the Sermon on the Mount. In it Jesus warns us not to be like actors playing a part in life—actually he says don’t be like the hypocrites—instead he calls us to be genuine in 3 things; fasting, prayer, and

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almsgiving. Those are not likely the initial things that come to mind. At first glance that may seem like going into a knife fight with a toothpick, but it isn't!!!!

The Church's historic disciplines of Lent hold a special power to assist us in personal and communal transformation. Why fast? What is the big deal about "giving up something for Lent"? In fasting we will find several things happen in us. One is that *things* begin to take on their proper place. The seeking of satisfaction and pleasure is replaced by a realization that all we have comes from God on whom we owe our creation, sustenance, and hope. Fasting is a rejection of sheer hedonism as the end and purpose of life. Fasting also gives us a chance to learn something about self-control and discipline. Even in the discomfort and pain that we may temporarily feel we are sharing Christ's suffering for a hungering world. Our willingness to do without removes the desire for that item from its position of power in our lives, and we are made mindful of how gracious God has been to us.

Prayer is the second weapon we have been given. Should that really surprise us as Anglicans? After all, our chief book after Scripture is: The Book of Common Prayer. Let us ask this question, Is it really possible to speak with and truly listen to another and then pretend the conversation never occurred? We do not begin our prayers with, "IF anyone is out there..." although we may feel that way from time to time. Prayer is to enter into an opportunity to have our worlds transformed and altered. I can be working away at some project which I think is indispensable to the world or at least Twin Lakes and be absolutely absorbed to the point that no television program, phone call, or even smell from the kitchen breaks through. But let one of my granddaughters come up and hugs me and say, Grandpa, I love you, and the world changed. A new reality has cut across what appears important. Prayer as resting in God's presence, speaking out honestly about our needs, and listening patiently is a means of grace that assists us in rejecting the foolishness of this age which believes only the material is real.

Finally, Almsgiving is a word we rarely use and when we do we probably think of it as dropping a few more shekels into the offering plate. That isn't exactly what Jesus had in mind. Yes, providing for the financial needs of the world is part of our calling and mission. But the word alms derives from the Greek word that means to have compassion. We refer to our Lord's journey to the cross as his Passion, and what we mean is his self-giving for the world. The pursuit of power and control is a very heady and tempting thing. We admire people who get things done and who seem to be in control and give direction. It is terribly tempting to want to have that kind of impact on others. But power in the Christian Community is about assisting others to achieve their destiny as a child of God. Anytime power becomes self-serving, whether politically (as now), economically, or interpersonally, it is **idolatry**. Almsgiving means literally to give out of our own passion for the world and to see those about us not as objects to be used, but as persons to be served. When we engage in that, God transforms our views of power so that they are tempered by **mission.**

In the process of the Lenten disciplines those things that tempt us most loose some of their control over us. Temptations are deprived of their power, and we can see and live more clearly as those who go toward Jerusalem for the life of the world. Just when things seem to be the most difficult, the unthinkable happens. God takes some of the simplest gifts and provides us with strength for the journey, and the clear reminder that He alone stands at the center of life.

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Amen+