

SERMON – FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT – 21 FEBRUARY 2021

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+

It is an eye-opening and mind-bending experience to quietly watch children at play. Often they have an uncanny ability to find joy and amusement in unusual places, and to let things unfold without reference to what others expect of them, or to how things are “supposed” to be. They can also have an unnerving ability to speak what comes to mind without regard to social propriety or parental desires! It is not uncommon to hear the truth uttered by youngsters unvarnished as yet by learning polish or diplomacy. The phrase, “if you don’t want to know, don’t ask” comes to mind. Another trait is also prevalent with children, and that is the way they play games. Walking in the neighborhood I witnessed several children taking advantage of a little sunshine and playing basketball. One of them marked chalk on the driveway to show the 3-point line, when his younger sibling drew another outside of it and stated emphatically, “This is the 4-point line!” (If only, my bank would allow me to read my checking account with such freedom!!) The point is, of course, that from an early age we all seek to win in whatever undertaking in which we engage, even if it means changing the rules by which we operate. No athlete attempts to have the other team outscore theirs. No business seeks to have lower sales than their nearest competitor. No one likes to be “out done” by another regardless of the activity. But, let us pose one question for today; is there a time when not playing by the acceptable rules is really winning? Is there a time in living that the “normal” way of looking at the world and our relationships just flatly contradicts what God desires for us? Might there be times and moments when we should choose different rules by which to live and move?

On this first Sunday in Lent we are greeted once again with the text of Jesus’ stepping into the wilderness where he engages the tempter. Matthew makes much of this story while telling it in a different way from St. Mark, with his shorthand edition, and St. Luke who focuses on the Spirit’s role and reverses some of the dialogue. It is what we call a ‘Haggadah’, that is a Jewish story intended for the edification and insight of its hearers. Jesus is engaged in a rabbinical disputation—a back and forth so that the truth is uncovered. Like so many stories in the NT, the first or surface reading is not what the writer wants us to hear. Where Luke shows the role of the Spirit in Jesus, Matthew shows it as a very stark confrontation between Jesus and the tempter. And since Jesus is one of us, these battles are ours’ as well. They showcase the human dilemma that occurs between us and God when we confuse our wills with His. Matthew intimates a hard question: “Are the followers of Jesus to seek miraculous rescue from the struggles of being human or is trusting in God’s faithfulness in the midst of struggles the way to fullness of life?” Do we want demonstrations of Divine Power or can we surrender our egos to live within God’s gracious will?

Notice that in each Gospel this drama follows immediately upon Jesus’ Baptism. This Sacrament never takes us out of life but gives us the graces to grapple with darkness. Look back at the liturgy for this great gift. Recall the questions, “What do you desire from the Church”, and more pointedly, “Do you renounce...the vain pomp and glory of this world, with all covetous desires of the same...nor be led by them?” Baptism grants regeneration and enjoins us to engage the world without and within, but it does not insulate us any more than it did Jesus. What comes to mind is Stanley Tucci’s line in *The Devil Wears Prada*, when as she approaches. “Gird your loins”! Let the games begin!

In Matthew’s telling we begin in the wilderness, with the example of Jesus as model of faithfulness, and with a shadowy figure on whose lips all too familiar points of view are voiced. Perhaps we should consider those a bit more and carefully.

The wilderness is well known in Scripture and spiritual literature. Moses, Israel seeking freedom from exile, Elijah facing the hostility of Jezebel, St. John of the Cross wrestling with his own sense of abandonment, and countless others wandered in and through struggles and obstacles they label as desert. There is a reason this imagery is so prevalent. It is the place/time/experience where we humans find

ourselves alone long enough to be unable to run from ourselves. I suspect so much of our rampant business may have something to do with escaping the quiet wherein our deepest questions and concerns about ourselves and our relationship to God arise. It is in times of solitude and aloneness that we may in fact be most honest in seeing who we are and what we want of God. That is precisely what Matthew wants of us. He is telling us that in the wilderness we will discover the tempter in this story looks a lot like us, not some foreign character, for he gives voice to the temptations and challenges we have with God. So, we come to the core of this part of the story and what it can mean for our Lenten journey. By seeing the temptations we have and often want fulfilled, we may also find that losing/giving them away is actually winning.

The first of the temptations is to turn stones into bread. What really is at stake is giving supreme place to our desires and sensate satisfaction. It is a sign of spiritual disorder in life when we are subservient to the thirst of our own egos. It is not the hunger that is the issue, but whether it takes control and presses out God's gift of the bread of life as the real source of satisfaction. This is granting to what is partial the power of the eternal. Jesus, our partner, reminds us the temporal is a poor nutritional substitute for what God offers us sacramentally. The bread is never just for us.

The second temptation we encounter is attempting to use God for our own ends. The real issue for Jesus was that to do what he was asked would have meant everyone around him would have been impressed and followed along with joy and glee. It is the temptation to use God as a power broker in order to appear spectacular and to make the creature prior to the creator. Had our Lord succumbed to this he surely would not have met the challenge of the cross. And in the same moment the real power of God to encounter and be present to human suffering and weakness would likewise have been lost. Winning in the short term would have deprived the world of one of its deepest needs; the God who is willing to be with the darkest places in life. If I may be permitted a personal note: I found myself asking my spiritual director a question. "Why is it that the closer I feel in my relationship with God, the more discouraged I get by the world around me?" It seemed to me that I should have been having the opposite reaction. That, somehow, my deepening relationship with God would give me a filter through which the pain and hurt, the chaos and violence of the world would pale in comparison to the hope and joy that I knew was all around me. But that's not what happened. I found myself profoundly affected by others' pain. So, I stopped reading and watching the news. But then I noticed that the more I removed myself from the pain and conflict around me, the more I had put distance between myself and God. I couldn't have it both ways. That's just what happens. It is the risk of being in relationship with God. When we allow our hearts to be open to God, we give up control of what, or who, finds their way in. In short, we cannot merely seek after our own well-being. Jesus refused this path.

Notice that what the tempter demands here, the crowd demands on Good Friday. And also notice, that the tempter conveniently leaves out the remainder of the quote from Psalm 91—"You will tread on the serpent...Because he loves and clings to me, I will rescue him." This is the language of Good Friday and Easter, not manipulation.

The final temptation is particularly reflective of our age. It is the urge to simply be powerful in terms of human wealth, influence, domination, and violence. It is to win by forceful subjection of all others. It is seen in the fruitless belief that we can rid ourselves of enemies by overpowering them. In truth hurling stones may force others into temporary submission, but it does not alter hearts or minds. You can have it all if you are willing to yield to me, says the evil one. That is the false promise and false hope. What makes it so powerful is the feeling that we can place ourselves above the world, yet God chooses the exact opposite. He chooses to stand in the mess and love us anyway; not by force, but by caring more deeply and freely for us even in our hurts, frustration, or anger. God does not use coercion, but compassion to win the world. Jesus joins all humanity in his humanness and sharing in the temptations that plague us. He overcomes by abiding in his Father's life.

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As we walk these great forty days from temptation to the cross, I ask you to walk gently and with your hearts open. Listen for Jesus. He will call out to you as he makes his way from temptation to crucifixion. Jesus will call out to you at each step. And in the midst of death, domination, and violence, you will hear his voice: "Choose life," Choose my way and the life it promises. It may look to all the world like losing...but sometimes losing is winning. Amen+