

“Empty Jar”

Luke 4:1-13

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The forty days of Lent parallel Jesus' forty days in the wilderness. Frederick Buechner writes that “Jesus went off alone into the wilderness where he spent forty days asking himself the question what it meant to be Jesus. During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask one way or another what it means to be themselves.” The scripture says that Jesus fasted which was not so much about self-deprivation but more about being able to find clarity of focus and vision. In that day and time finding and preparing food took enormous time and effort. Fasting enables Jesus to choose not to be distracted by the chores of daily life, the gathering, preparing, and eating of food; but rather he chooses to pay attention to the ministry God has given him to do. And he chooses to be alone. And in this undistracted, uncompromised state of mind, Jesus is tempted by possibilities for his future. He's given three choices that strike at the question of who Jesus is.

The first temptation has to do with bread, the sustenance of life. “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” This is a heel of the bread loaf. I often remember as a child seeing my mother eat the heel because the rest of the family didn't want it. I wondered why she willingly ate what I thought was not as good. My mother knew what it felt like to be hungry as a child of the depression. She also knew what was most important to her and that was that her family was fed and cared for. She knew that her very life didn't depend on bread for herself but as bread for us because she loved us so much. Jesus does not say that bread is irrelevant; he just says that human beings need more than bread to stay alive. So for us the temptation might pose this question: “Is satisfying our own physical needs what is most important to us? What compromises are we willing to make just to stay alive or maintain a certain standard of living?”

The second temptation is “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘on their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” Will Jesus take advantage of his Son-ship by adopting a ministry of show man ship and fame, jumping off buildings with a single bound and trusting in God to rescue him? Jesus rejects this temptation because he knows that his ministry is to point to God. Jesus isn't in it for himself; he's in it for God.

Friday morning I attended a memorial service where I heard a very moving memorial tribute. The woman giving the tribute told how she grew up in a loving family who cared for her deeply, but her mother and father could never accept the fact that God had created her a lesbian woman. And so, the woman who she was paying tribute to had become her “mother in Christ” and gave her the unconditional love of the God who made her who she was. Jesus also knew who his spiritual parent was, and he knew that what matters is what God thinks about us.

The third temptation is “All this I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Who are we going to worship? The Bible talks a lot about idolatry. We think of idols as sacred statues, worshipped by people long ago. But idolatry is much more. Idolatry is all that consumes our thinking, feeling, living, and devotion other than that which is holy. To worship is to give ones heart to; idolatry is to give one's heart to something not God. Jesus would not worship the powers of this world, because his whole self, heart and soul, belonged to God.

This season of Lent is a grown up “time out” when we can “be still” and think about to whom we will give our hearts. Life is complicated and it is easy to get caught up in details and not see what is truly important. Yet, for 40 days we are given permission, even encouraged, to become like empty jars broken open so that the cooling, healing, stream of God's spirit may flow through us and our lives and quench a drought stricken world.