

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The First Sunday in Lent¹

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw, Rector

Lessons:

The First Lesson:² Here beginneth the fifty-eighth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.³

“Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew [SHOW] my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins. Yet they seek me daily, and delight to know my ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinance of their God: they ask of me the ordinances of justice; they take delight in approaching to God.

“Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours. Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high. Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?

“Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the Lord shall be thy reward⁴ [REAR-ward]. Then shalt thou call, and the LORD shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am. If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking vanity; And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in

obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noon day: And the LORD shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not. And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in.

“If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: Then shalt thou delight thyself in the LORD; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson:⁵ Here beginneth the fourth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.⁶

“Then was Jesus led up of the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred. And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, and saith [SETH] unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God. Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth [SHOW-eth] him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; and saith

We all face the same temptations that Jesus faced. We need to face them as He did. Be guided by the Scriptures. Assert control. Do not be deceived. Do not be a victim. God will help you if you set your heart on him.

“You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.” That’s what we are here for.

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St. David’s Anglican Church
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¹ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Holy Communion on the First Sunday in Lent, 2013.

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xvi (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ Isaiah 58:1-end (KJV).

⁴ *I.e.*, rear guard.

⁵ “Upon any Sunday or Holy Day, the Minister may read the Epistle or the Gospel of the Day in place of the Second Lesson at Morning or Evening Prayer.” *Concerning the Service of the Church*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁶ St. Matthew 4:1-11 (KJV).

The devil is constantly trying to win control over every human heart, including yours. If he can gain a foothold at the physical level, he can leverage that to gain control at other levels of your life as well, because your physical life, your emotional life, and your spiritual life are all connected.

When you eat too much or drink too much, your emotional life as well as your physical activities are effected. In turn, your emotional life effects your physical life. Think of the times for instance, when you have eaten something or taken a nap, not because you were hungry or tired but because you were depressed or bored. You are one person, and you cannot resist the devil at one or two levels and give in to him on the other level. If you want to be free, you must assert control over all three aspects of your life: physical, emotional, and spiritual.

Just as the devil can leverage a foothold at one level to gain an advantage at another, so can you. That's where fasting comes in. It teaches you to acknowledge the power of physical urges and yet make a conscious decision not to allow them to control your behavior. Once you learn to do that at the physical level, you are in a position to do the same with your emotional urges. You can, for instance, acknowledge that you are angry and yet make a conscious decision not act out your anger with cross words or hostile actions.

The real challenge comes at the spiritual level, which is where the overall direction of your life is determined. You can assert control over your physical desires and your emotional urges, but unless your will is directed toward a worthy goal you are still a victim and are not really free.

If you direct your will toward the mere acquisition of power and wealth in this world, as Jesus was tempted to do, you will become the servant of the powers of this world. But you were created for the service of God, and believe me, God treats His servants in the end much better that the devil treats his.

[SETH] unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. Then saith [SETH] Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

When the children of Israel emerged from the Red Sea, they were led by the Spirit of God into the desert to be tempted and tested. They failed the test. But in the person of Jesus they were given a second chance. Jesus recapitulated the wilderness experience as He emerged from the River Jordan, where He was baptized, and was immediately driven by the Spirit into the desert to be tested and tempted by the devil. This time it was different. Jesus did not fail.

In the Garden of Eden the devil employed a three part strategy against Adam and Eve. He employed the same strategy against Jesus. He appealed to the physical part of human nature—the fruit in the garden was good to eat. He appealed to the emotional part of human nature—the tree was pleasing to the eye. And he appealed to the spiritual side of human nature—the fruit would make them wise and lift them to the level of deity.

The first attempt to try to gain control of the life of Jesus also came at the physical level. “You must be very hungry,” said the devil. “Why don’t you use your divine creative power to get yourself something to eat?”

That was a very subtle temptation because eating is not evil. Jesus was fully human and could not help feeling the impact of hunger or any other physical sensation. But Jesus saw the deeper implications. It was a matter of control. Would

the life of Jesus be governed by His physical appetites, or would he assert control over them? Would His physical desires set His agenda and direct His activities, or would He determine His own destiny by taking charge of His body and responding to its demands on His own terms?

Jesus turned to the book of Deuteronomy: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”

The second attack came at the emotional level. The temptation was to do something dramatic that would attract everyone’s attention. Jump off the highest pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem and then get up and walk away. That will make you famous. You will be a hero. People will be hanging on your every word after that.

There are several factors that make that temptation attractive. One is the element of flattery, which is one of the devil’s favorite devices. Jesus is being told that He is somebody special. He can do things that nobody else can do. His ego is being massaged.

At the same time there is the element of challenge. You are a coward if you do not accept a dare.

All of that plus the element of excitement and the promise of instant success make for powerful urges, and Jesus certainly felt them. But once again He decided not to follow or be led by them. He is not the servant of His emotions, and therefore the great manipulator of human emotions is foiled at that level also.

The devil quotes a verse of scripture. He’s good at isolating verses that seem to support what he wants to do. It’s a tactic known as “proof texting.” But Jesus counters with a text that exposes the devil’s real intentions: “You shall not put God to the test.”

By now it was apparent that Jesus was going to determine the direction of His life by His own conscious will. He would not be governed by His emotions or His physical desires. So the devil turned to the spiritual level and resorted to a direct attack on the control center of Jesus’ life. He tried to turn His will around with a kind of bribery.

“The rewards of evil,” he said, “are greater than the rewards of goodness. If you will throw in with me instead of with God, you will find that I can offer you much more than he can. You have tremendous power. Let me show you what you can do with it.”

Then the devil showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them, the wealth, the comfort, the honor, and the prestige. “All this can be yours,” said the tempter. “Cast your lot with me and you can have it all.”

That was a real possibility for Jesus, and He knew it. He also knew that the price would be too high. He had accepted from His Father a far more significant mission. He came into the world to sacrifice Himself for the benefit of others. To accept as His goal the acquisition of worldly power would be to sacrifice His integrity and to deprive His life of its fundamental meaning.

Jesus came to be the Savior, not the dominator, of the world. In other words, He was determined to serve God rather than the devil. So He turned once again to Deuteronomy: “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.”

Then the devil departed for a time—but only for a time. The temptations of Jesus were by no means over. This Gospel passage is an artistic condensation into a single episode of the ongoing struggle that took place in the soul of Jesus throughout His life on earth. And that same struggle goes on in the soul of everyman throughout his life on earth.