

## Where the road will take us

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The journey of Lent is a season for soul-searching and repentance. It is a season for reflection and taking stock. Lent originated in the very earliest days of the church as a preparation time for Easter, when the faithful rededicate themselves and when converts were instructed in the faith and prepared for baptism.

As a Christian pilgrim journeys through these forty days of Lent, he or she imitates Jesus' withdrawal into the wilderness, our withdrawal into the wilderness with him.

The origins of forty days of fasting come directly from the experience of Jesus. It is also remarkable that Moses fasted forty days on the mountain before receiving the law from God, and as Elijah, the chief of prophets, also fasted forty days. The journey of the Lenten discipline takes us on the road with Jesus through the wilderness and eventually to the cross.

In turning to the Gospel of Luke chapter 4, verses 1-13, we enter the wilderness with Jesus. We know that while in that Judean desert full of natural terraces and escarpments cascading down to the Dead Sea as well as the Jordan Valley, Jesus fasted and prayed for guidance. It was there that he was confronted by the Devil, the evil one, who came to tempt him to change his loyalty and commitment. The reality of fasting is that a person becomes weak and vulnerable. While even some people experience hallucinations.

Jesus' weakness made him vulnerable to the temptations placed before him by the Devil. Three times the Devil tempted him with opportunities to abandon his devotion to God.

The first temptation came in a direct challenge to Jesus to exploit his special relationship as the Son of God. "The Devil said to him, **"If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."** Jesus answered him, **"It is written, and 'One does not live by bread alone.'"** (3-4) The Devil knew Jesus was in need of food and offered him a chance to use his powers to break the fast.

Jesus responded to the Devil saying that there is more than one need besides bread or food. There is a spiritual nurturing of the heart, mind and soul that one must have to draw closer to God's heart and love.

The second temptation came to Jesus when the Devil showed the kingdoms of the world to him. The Devil said, **"To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will be all yours."** Jesus answered, **"It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"** (6-8) Again, Jesus resisted the Devil by going right to the heart of who Christ loves and worships. The promise of ultimate power and worship of evil was struck down through the words of a total devotion to God. Jesus was not afraid to share what he believed.

The third temptation came to Jesus when the Devil took him to a high place above the Temple in Jerusalem. The devil said, **"If you are the Son of God,**

**throw yourself down from here, for it is written, ‘He will command angels concerning you, to protect you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”** Jesus once again answered the evil one by saying, **“It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”** Jesus stayed true to his relationship with God by resisting the temptation of the Devil.

The relationship to God remained strong even when Jesus was weak, hungry and tempted. He knew the temptations would draw him away from the loving God and cause him to do ungodly things.

Well friends, the lord sets the example as to how we are to act and profess in the journey ahead of us through the wilderness. He was traveling the wilderness road to come to a time of affirmation in his calling to serve. We, too, can take our place in the wilderness journey by professing our devotion to the savior and resisting the temptation pull of evil.

When we totally commit to following Christ, we then know where the road will take us to a place where our relationships and hearts are totally on the goodness and the love of God. If we take another route where Christ is absent or glimpsed sporadically, the temptation is to do harm and mischief to others.

As a Transitional Pastor, I have served within congregations who strive for goodness, wholeness and love in their ministry to serve Christ and where fellowship abounds and music abounds. In some of the conflict congregations I have entered, some members have been lured away from Christ by the temptations of the Devil. I stand before you as a pastor who has endured character assassination from others, stood up to those who threatened physical violence, called out groups and individuals who practiced triangulation against me and others, and dissuaded those who plan to hurt and destroy another member or a fellow pastor.

As a Christian and a Pastor, if I fail to address these things then I am taking the wilderness road of the Devil. Plausibly deniability is no longer an option.

There have been a few times when I was involved in proceedings to remove a pastor from a congregation who was destroying and dividing the membership of a church. That pastor actively triangulated member against member and even caused divisions in families. He was removed from that church, he renounced the jurisdiction of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and half the congregation followed him to form an independent church.

Another time was when a Senior Pastor and an Associate Pastor were at odds with one another and they each developed supporting factions which fought for control of the church. They actually fought for the control of Christ’s church. They were both removed from their pastoral positions by the presbytery. I believe after six years that congregation has come back to a faithful place with a new pastor.

It must also be said, that the role of a Christian pastor today is difficult for some and satisfying for others. The struggle of any congregation to survive is threatened from outside and more so today, from within. Yes, Christ is preached and discipleship is a way of life. However, the Devil, the evil one, is waiting, watching and sneaking into people’s lives unbeknownst to them. The Devil is at work.

Well the best way I have alerted folks to the ways of dealing with evil, within the church and outside the church, is this; when you are asked to sign a petition, or send a letter to presbytery or to join a group against someone else or a pastor, pause for a moment to determine if this is an action of Christ or is it an action of the Devil. A living and committed life to Christ will help you see the difference.

Now, many of you know that back during the 1970's there was a comedian named Flip Wilson. One of his characters was Geraldine Jones who was always doing things or buying things and then she would feel guilty about it. But Geraldine's way of justifying her actions was by saying "the Devil made me do it!"

If we truly follow Christ everyday then there is no need to make the excuse that the "Devil made me do it!" The temptations by the Devil, the evil one, are real and they are alive. So watch out, be aware, for the Devil is trying to work on you.

Another way for us to stay within the goodness and image of God, we must truly live as Christ taught us - to love, to care, to share. To have compassion and to reach out to others to make them feel welcome. For me, I keep the words of Horatio R. Palmer's 1868 hymn always in my mind and heart. It goes like this:

**1. Yield not to temptation, for yielding is sin;  
each vict'ry will help you some other to win;  
fight manfully onward, dark passions subdue;  
look ever to jesus, he'll carry you through.**

- ***Refrain:***  
**ask the savior to help you,  
comfort, strengthen, and keep you;  
he is willing to aid you,  
he will carry you through.**

**2. Shun evil companions, bad language disdain,  
god's name hold in rev'ence, nor take it in vain;  
be thoughtful and earnest, kindhearted and true;  
look ever to jesus, he'll carry you through.**

So friends, the Lord leads us through the wilderness journey with his love, grace and peace. As you and I travel the Lenten journey, we too are going to be tempted to resist keeping God at the center of our lives. We will be tempted. Even everyday situations can lead us into temptation.

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, all around us temptation waits to draw us away from God. Jesus shows us the way to resist the temptations of the world by keeping one's heart, mind and soul focused on the Creator and the Creator's great love. This Lenten journey moves us forward to renew our commitment to Jesus and all that he gave up for each of us on the cross. Renew your commitment to Jesus.

The stronger we are in our relationship to God, the more resilient our faith becomes. During this Lenten season, may we seek to strengthen our spiritual journey by resisting the temptations that cause us to break away from Jesus and the love of God.

May we confidently walk with Jesus through the many wildernesses of life and find a place of love and salvation. Most of all, resist the temptations from the devil because the devil is at work.

As people of faith, remember,

***Ask the Savior to help you,  
Comfort, strengthen, and keep you;  
He is willing to aid you,  
He will carry you through.***

Jesus will be with you through the wildernesses of life, through the opportunities for each day and through all relationships we that have. Jesus will carry you through. Jesus, the Son of God.

Let us pray: Dear God, keep us strong during this season of Lent as we walk with Jesus to Jerusalem. Thank you God, for the strength of Jesus as he shows us the way to remain faithful in the face of temptation. In Jesus holy name we pray. Amen.

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Supporting scriptures:

**Luke 4:1-13 (NRSV)**

<sup>1</sup>Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the spirit in the wilderness, <sup>2</sup>where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. <sup>3</sup>The devil said to him, "If you are the son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." <sup>4</sup>Jesus answered him, "**It is written, and 'One does not live by bread alone.'**" <sup>5</sup>Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup>And the devil said to him, "to you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. <sup>7</sup>If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." <sup>8</sup>Jesus answered him, "**it is written, 'worship the lord your god, and serve only him.'**" <sup>9</sup>Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "if you are the son of God, throw yourself down from here, <sup>10</sup>for it is written, 'he will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' <sup>11</sup>and 'on their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" <sup>12</sup>Jesus answered him, "**it is said, 'do not put the lord your god to the test.'**" <sup>13</sup>When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.