

TEMPTED  
(Matthew 4;1-11)

Here we are – the first Sunday in Lent, which is a strange season, when you think about it. You won't find Lent mentioned anywhere in the Bible, so where did it come from and why do we have such a thing?

A little history helps. The early church looked for Christ to come riding in on the clouds at any moment – tomorrow or the week after next at the latest. But it didn't happen...and it didn't happen. That's what biblical scholars call the problem of the delayed parousia. Jesus was supposed to come back, but he didn't. And after a good long while, church folks decided they were in it for the long haul and they might as well settle down and get comfortable while they were waiting. They lost the urgency they had felt when they expected Christ's quick return. Pretty soon you couldn't tell a Christian from anyone else. They weren't noticeably different from their neighbors. They didn't get arrested for championing the poor. They blended in. They avoided extremes. They settled for being nice instead of holy.

Then someone remembered that Israel and Elijah and Jesus had all spent time in the desert, wandering around, suffering, longing, learning. Maybe that was what the church needed – a desert time to clean out the system and open their eyes to what's left when comfort is gone, to remember what it's like to live by God's grace and not by what we supply ourselves. And so Lent was born.

Lent is a time to take away what Barbara Brown Taylor calls our "pacifiers" – all those things that convince us we don't really need God, all those things that we use to try to fill the empty space inside us that belongs to God.

Last week we were on a mountaintop with Jesus. Today we're with him in the desert. And again, the location matters, topography matters. Belden Lane says landscape helps determine how we think about God because spirit and place are linked.

That dawned on me when I was in Israel. Every evening we would go up on the roof of the Tantur Institute where I was staying and look east toward the desert where Jesus was tempted, where the Israelites wandered, where Elijah fled to escape the wrath of Jezebel. It's a bleak, austere, foreboding landscape. And the thought came to me that spending time in the desert must have influenced how Israel thought about God, how Elijah understood his mission, and how Jesus came to terms with his calling. The desert brings you face to face with yourself and makes you realize just how small and insignificant you really are.

Matthew tells us that immediately after he was baptized, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted. The timing can't be a coincidence. Jesus has just heard a voice from heaven announcing, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." He must have wondered what that meant. He needed some time to get away, to be alone and think about it. What

better place than the desert, where he spent those forty days asking himself what it meant to be Jesus.

Lent is that kind of time for us – forty days (not counting Sundays) when we might do well to ask what it means to be ourselves, what it means to be a disciple, what it is that God might be calling us to be and to do.

Jesus fasted during his forty days in the desert. The story says he was famished, which means he was weak and vulnerable. His defenses were down. He was human at the most basic level – the level where it all comes down to simple survival.

If you've ever watched one of the survival shows on the Discovery Channel – and there seems to be a new one each week – you know what people are capable of eating when they're hungry – termites, slugs, snakes, scorpions, things you don't find at the supermarket and that you wouldn't dream of putting in your mouth except maybe in a nightmare. But if you get hungry enough....

We don't have to deprive ourselves quite that much during Lent, until we're so hungry and desperate that we will eat literally anything. That's not the point of giving something up for Lent. The point instead is to help us look at our lives, to ask ourselves some simple questions: Do I really need this? Can I get by without it? Would I actually be better off without it? And if we start asking those questions about something small, we might eventually get around to asking some bigger questions like: What is my life all about? What really matters? What do I really need? Who am I? What am I becoming or not becoming?

Just asking questions like that can be pretty depressing business. Introspection is hard work. And answering those questions honestly can be really depressing. But if sackcloth and ashes are at the beginning of Lent, something like Easter may be at the end.

Jesus found the answer to what it meant to be Jesus in the way he responded to the temptations the devil threw at him. And the answer was: one who uses his power and authority for others. Jesus was tempted to use his power and authority for himself – to satisfy his own hunger, to glorify himself, to claim political power for himself.

It's one thing for Jesus to get the answer, to discover for himself what it means to be Jesus. Dietrich Bonhoeffer asked a different question. He wanted to know: Who is Christ for us today? What does Jesus mean for Christians 2000 years later? And Bonhoeffer's answer was profoundly simple: Jesus, he said, is "the man for others." Jesus, he said, was always and only there for others, from the very beginning of his ministry right up to his death on the cross.

"The man for others" was Bonhoeffer's answer to the question "who is Jesus?" But that wasn't merely some abstract proposition as far as he was concerned. It had practical implications because Bonhoeffer expected the church to follow suit and imitate the one it claims to follow. That means the church is also supposed to exist for others. The church can only be the church if it lives as Jesus lived, only if it exists for others – not dominating or condemning, but helping and serving, making its life available to our neighbors, being a blessing to the world. We encounter God in the midst of life when we are there for our neighbors.

Jesus' time in the desert confirmed his calling, it strengthened his sense of purpose, it hardened his resolve. When it comes to resisting temptation, he's in a league by his own. He managed to do it for forty days; I have trouble doing it for forty minutes. None of us can come close to matching his steadfastness. We're always at risk of falling prey to doubt, being led off in the wrong direction, making faithless choices, giving in to unholy distractions.

Like those early Christians who settled down and got comfortable, we're tempted to turn away from the suffering of the world, tempted to build our own defenses against doubt and risk, tempted to concentrate not only on our own needs but also our own wants before we think of others. We take it for granted that we're in it for the long haul, so we might as well make ourselves comfortable and at home in the world. And when we do, we forget who we are and fall prey to the tempter.

It's very easy to focus on taking care of ourselves, our families, maybe our church, and perhaps the neighbors around us. But that makes our mission too small, too narrow. And that's just fine with the devil. The smaller and narrower we keep our ministry, the more room there is for the devil to cause mischief and suffering. Jesus resisted the temptation to restrict his ministry – and we're called to do the same. Reaching out beyond the circle of those we know and love requires us to stretch our sympathies and our energies so we, like Jesus, can be there for others.