

Sermon March 10, 2019 Lent 1C

What speaks to me most in Luke's account of the Temptation in the Desert is not so much what Jesus does - namely fast in the desert for almost six weeks - as what He does not do. It seems to me that so much of the time we have staked our 'belief' in Jesus on His abilities as a wonder worker: the miraculous healings and the miraculous feedings of thousands, etc. I guess our line of reasoning must go something like this: "Jesus had something like superpowers, the ability to do things we cannot do - miraculous things - therefore those powers must be a sign that He is the Son of God and we should worship and believe in Him."

Yet, in spite of persistent promptings of the Tempter, there is none of that here. Wouldn't this be the perfect time for that? When He is facing the devil? I mean He has been in the desert forty days and forty nights. Taking up the invitation to turn stones into bread would fulfill at least two functions. It would put the devil in his (or her) place and it would give Jesus himself something to eat. Yet instead of manifesting bread from stones as we say He did in the Feeding of the 5000, after 40 long days of fasting in the wilderness, He does what absolutely any one of us sitting here today not only could do, but would be obliged to do: He goes extremely, extremely hungry - "famished" as the gospel tells us.

It makes you wonder why. And certainly one part of the answer is in the reply He makes to the tempter. Quoting the Book of Deuteronomy He points out a truth that comes from His lips more than once in the Gospels: that we do not live by bread alone. That insight is potentially very helpful to *us*, because we live in a time and place when it is so easy *to* live by bread alone. We have so much of it and so little is required of most of us to get it. All we have to do is pick it up and carry home - or have it delivered. It's a dream come true really and I know we are very very thankful. I read an article recently that pointed out that for us now, hunger is a *mood* - a *mood!* - and that if, as so many of us do, we want to lose weight we need to come to grips with that. Isn't that wonderful? Are we not blessed beyond belief? That hunger could be for us a mood? I think there have been untold multitudes of people throughout history on planet earth who would have loved to have the luxury of thinking of hunger as a mood. But in a sense, hasn't our blessed state with regard to food brought about the situation predicted by the prophet Amos in the old testament?

*The time is surely coming, says the Lord God,
when I will send a famine on the land;
not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water,*

but of hearing the words of the Lord.

I do believe I detect some of that among us at times, that far from being hungry for food, we are hungry for purpose, hungry to hear the word of the Lord, so we can know what our lives and our tremendous wealth are *for*.

It's helpful to hear on the first Sunday of Lent that we do not live by bread alone. What a perfect opportunity we have now to explore that - by fasting. To break through our dependence on bread in the hope of finding something deeper and more eternal, to re-acquaint ourselves with the word of God. We could do that now. In preparation for Easter we could find some quiet moments and open the Bible - on an empty stomach even - and read ahead of time the passion stories of the Gospels so we can be *prepared* when Easter comes, ready to worship on Good Friday, the most difficult of days. On that day of course Jesus will do the one thing that everyone of us not only can do, but one day *will* do, and in so doing accomplish the greatest transformation of all, *for* all.

So perhaps that is part of why Jesus did not use His superpowers to take the mickey out of the devil when He met Him at the end of His forty days. But maybe there is another reason as well.

Perhaps it is more important than we think that in facing the devil Jesus chose to use *only* the very same resources that we ourselves all have. Perhaps He did that deliberately, for our sake. Perhaps He wanted us to see, not so much what He could do for us, but what we can do for ourselves. Perhaps that was part of His mission.

A quote that has been floating around Facebook may shed some light on this. It comes from a book called “The Naked Now” by a Franciscan Friar, Fr. Richard Rohr. Please forgive me, the full quote is a bit long, but I hope it will be worth hearing:

Jesus, as the icon of Christ consciousness (1 Corinthians 2:16), is the very template of total paradox: human yet divine, heavenly yet earthly, physical yet spiritual, a male body yet a female soul, killed yet alive, powerless yet powerful, victim yet victor, failure yet redeemer, marginalized yet central, singular yet everyone, incarnate yet cosmic, nailed yet liberated. He resolves the major philosophical problem of “the one and the many.” Jesus has no trouble with contraries. He is always holding contraries together.

I have often said that the job of religion is to make one out of two: the healing of fractured relationships, the forgiveness of everything for being imperfect, marriage itself, the central process of divinization of the human person. Throughout most of our history, we could not, or were not told how to hold the opposites together. In most cases, people either lacked the inner spiritual experience or the intellectual tools, or both. We were largely unable to find the pattern that connected all the mysteries, even though it had been fully given to us in Jesus. We worshipped Jesus instead of following him on his same path. We made Jesus into a mere religion instead of a journey toward union with God and everything else. This shift made us into a religion of “belonging and believing” instead of a religion of transformation.

Open yourself to recognizing the great paradoxes within Jesus. Then you can begin to hold those same opposites together within yourself.

Three sentences there seem worth repeating:

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journey toward union with God and everything else. This shift made us into a religion of “belonging and believing” instead of a religion of transformation.

So I am going to say something that will seem funny for me to say. As we journey toward Easter, as we try to be prepared to do what He asked us to do, namely take up *our* cross and follow Him, what if we give it a try? In light of the great paradoxes within Jesus that Fr. Richard mentions, what if we worship Him a little less? And try following Him on His path, at least a few steps. There is no doubt that the path of Jesus leads through suffering. Very much so. But don't we have our fill of comfort most of the time? I know we also have real suffering as well. I don't make light of that for any of us. But what if we chose intentionally to take a few steps toward the cross? To know more about it? To know a little of the transformation in Jesus that Fr. Richard alludes to? Go a little way toward what he calls “union with God and everything else.” It's probably risky. I guess efforts to change always are. But if we take that chance, take up our cross, as Jesus did, now, freely, of our own choosing, might we not find ourselves the stronger for it in those times when suffering and the cross come to us uninvited? Could that transformation be part of His purpose? This Lent, why not try it and see?