

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, March 5, 2017
Rev. Andrew Reid
Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Matthew 4:1-11
“Journey to Jerusalem”

And so Lent begins. And with it our journey to Jerusalem and our 40 day journey to Easter begin. Just because we like to complicate things, the 40 days of Lent are spread over 46 days, from Ash Wednesday to Easter Day. The reason for that is that for the purposes of calculating the number of days in Lent, the six Sundays are not considered to be part of Lent. Sunday is the Lord’s Day, the day of resurrection, and even in Lent, it is always a day of celebration.

At this point in his earthly ministry, in the words of Luke 9:51, Jesus has *set his face to go up to Jerusalem*. In Matthew 16:21, Matthew tells us that as he and his disciples left Caesarea Philippi, Jesus *began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised*. Knowing what awaited him there; knowing what suffering he would face; trying to prepare his disciples for what they were about to see and experience and live through: Jesus set his face to go up to Jerusalem.

And today, as the church sets out to journey with Jesus to Jerusalem, we turn our attention to the story of Jesus’ being tempted by the devil. The writers of the Synoptic Gospels – St Matthew, St Mark and St Luke – all place the temptation story early in Jesus’ ministry. He appears on the scene as a grown man, is baptized by John the Baptizer, and is led by the Spirit of God into the wilderness, where he is tempted by the devil.

Nevertheless, the compilers of the Revised Common Lectionary have chosen to follow the church’s ancient practice of looking at Jesus’ temptation on the first Sunday of Lent – a quite appropriate time to do

so, as the story does set a solemn, sobering tone, in preparation for what lies ahead.

Typically of the concise and fast-moving way he wrote his Gospel, Mark tells the story of the temptation in just two verses, Mark 1:12-13: ¹²*And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.*

Matthew and Luke each give a fuller account of the story. In fact, their accounts are almost word for word identical, though they do disagree about the order in which Jesus faced the temptations. That would suggest that from a very early point in the history of the church, as early as the time when Matthew and Luke were writing, the story of the temptation was seen as a vitally important part of the story of Jesus' life and ministry.

The whole point of the temptations that Jesus faced is the absolute seriousness with which he took the great commandment in Deuteronomy 6:4-5: ⁴*Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*

The temptations that Jesus faced took different forms, but they all amounted to the same thing: the temptation to waver from the great commandment, either by making wild political claims, or by buying the support of the masses by giving them what they wanted, or by using signs and spectacles to impress people into faith. To all of these, Jesus replied with words that are also taken from the book of Deuteronomy.

- *The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear Deuteronomy 6:13*
- *Do not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah Deuteronomy 6:16*
- *He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to*

make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD Deuteronomy 8:3.

So why did that story have such importance for the early church? And why does it resonate so strongly with us today?

Maybe because it's all about personal integrity and honour, all about steadfastness and consistency. We live in a world where such things are not highly valued. But the temptations story reminds us that what we truly believe should be apparent from the way we live and behave and conduct ourselves at all times.

At all times. What's that line about how the measure of a person's character is how she or he behaves when no-one is looking? Jesus was alone when he was tempted. He was led up into the wilderness by the Spirit, and angels did come and wait on him. But the way Matthew tells it, it was only when it was all over that the angels came and waited on him. Until that moment, says Matthew, it was just Jesus and the devil and how to behave when no-one is looking.

What does that mean to the church today, and to people of faith like you and me as we seek to live godly lives of faith, when no-one is looking? How does Jesus' temptation, and the way he resisted it, help us in our living for Christ and his kingdom? After all, it's highly unlikely that we will have to face 40 hours without food, let alone 40 days, or that we will suddenly be standing on the highest building in town, being offered spectacular magical powers, or that we will find ourselves perched on a high mountain, looking down on all that kingdoms of the world and their splendour, being offered high political office.

But we may well find ourselves tempted in ways that are much less dramatic, but no less insidious. In fact, we often do find ourselves tempted in ways that are much less dramatic, but no less insidious:

- when we look at others and feel insecure about not having enough

- when we look at others and feel superior about having more
- when we gossip about someone and criticize them behind their back
- when we pass judgement on people who make choices we do not understand
- when we allow our temper to define and control who we are and how we act
- when we turn our backs on people in need
- when we laugh at a racist or a sexist joke.

Little things, all of them, but along with many more, they are the day-by-day and sometimes moment-by-moment tests of our integrity as followers of Jesus Christ, the measure of how we behave when only God is looking.

In her pastoral commentary on this passage in *Feasting on the Word*, Maryetta Anschutz writes:

Lenten penitence engages the dark places in our lives that we may come face to face with them, understand them, and seek forgiveness for them. It is not about guilt. It is about freedom from the control that our fears and insecurities have over us, about the amendment of life and new beginnings.

May this season of Lent be a time of amendment of life and new beginnings for you.