

First Sunday of Lent—Giving and Returning
Pastor Laura Hehner
February 17, 2013

So we're entering into our first week of Lent!

Not sure who of you have decided to give something up...

... if any of you have decided to work the loop hole and say you're giving up,
giving up something for Lent, this year.

During my internship I actually heard that from a couple of parishioners. Pretty clever.

But whatever you've decided to do, or not to do; these days are holy times.

These hours are God-hours.

They're moments meant to lift your spirit into the heart of God, to stay there, for a while.

In some of those mountaintop experiences.

Lent is a time of intimacy with God.

A long conversation.

A lot of back and forth.

Giving, and receiving, and returning.

And it's also a time of ... oo... youch....*temptation*, isn't it?

We make a commitment to give something up... almost hesitantly, sometimes, right?

That one thing pops into your mind that you know you should do, but don't want to do.

Then you struggle with it. You wrestle with it.

You're tempted to try to mentally jump to something **else**---

---far more pious to give up---

But ya *can't*.

And [**grumble** "okaaaay"] that's it. That'll be what I give up.

Then each day of Lent, each hour of Lent...

... you move through those tougher moments after the choice.

Each time your hand naturally goes for the soda can in the fridge,

or for the donut in the bakery section,

or for the coffee mug on the counter....

Or whatever other thing you're letting be a blank spot in your life for the fast....

You have to stop. Think. Remember. ...God.

And then you have that moment just after that---of that temptation---

to choose to stay in conversation with God, or to forget about it---

--break out of it---and just enjoy your sugar and caffeine.

...Some ...interesting... times, aren't they?

We talked last year about the purpose of the fast.

The reason behind doing all of this.

People on the outside, might think---- oh, well.

How funny those Christians are. Seriously? You're giving up watching a show?

That's piety?

And yes, it is. It is the purpose and function of the fast

that brings an experience of the holy into your life...

...not the object or thing you're holding back from, for the fast.

The purpose of a fast is to keep you in touch with God.

Constantly, throughout the day.

To remember God when you reach for that one thing you reach for the most.

To think about God, and as a result, see God in your mind for just a few moments
amongst all of those others, when the thought of God gets swept away into the clutter.

It's not what you reach for, and not grab.

The Lenten fast is about seeing God, there in front of you, in place of whatever that thing
is that's right now gone...

And feeling God in your heart,

No matter what little thing allowed for that to happen.

What it is, is a season of talking to God.

Each time you don't have that thing, and remember why you don't have that thing, and
your thoughts go to God,

you're entering into a moment of prayer.

And that's why it matters.

And that's why you can give up using *mascara* for the season of lent,

and that simple, tiny, seemingly meaningless thing,

Becomes an act of deep and holy reverence.

So that part of it... Part of the purpose and practice of Lent.

... then there's this other part of remembrance in this temptation we feel...

This other part of what the season of Lent, itself,

commemorates in the collective mind of the church...

And it has to do with our scripture for today.

It's this moment, right here:

From Luke, Chapter 4, verses 1-11:

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 2 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. 3 The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." 4 Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" 5 Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6 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. 7 If you, then, will worship *me*, it will all be yours." 8 Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" 9 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, 10 for it is *written*, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' 11 *and* 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" 12 Jesus answered him, "It is said, '*Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*'" 13 When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him *until an opportune time*. 14 Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.

Wow. That's a pretty crazy moment to think about, isn't it?

Jesus standing there, just trying to take some quiet time with himself and God

before really starting up his ministry, and walking ahead into God's plan for him...

... and there it is. That temptation. That darkness.

Trying to pull him away from what is good and right and holy to do.

Happens so often in our own lives, and I think that's why when I read this---

---as much as this circumstance is different in the fact

that it's one uniquely made for Jesus, the son of God---

As a child of God, I feel it too. I've known it too, in small ways.

And I know you, as a child of God, have felt it for yourself, also.

Because moments like these are the challenges

that come to all of us who choose to walk a spiritual path.

For us, more often it's those instances that can actually pass right under your nose and slip away, if you're not paying closer attention.

A lot of times I think when I'm reading scripture like this, that I need to give "the devil" some kind of dark and foreboding death-metal voice.

But no, not at all.

Because our temptations, and the potential to experience the spread of darkness in our lives never present themselves that demonically---that obviously.

Otherwise they wouldn't be too effective in getting into us, would they?

You've got a gnarly demon with pointy red wings and a black cloak pounding at your door,

and of course, you'll bolt up the lock, close the curtains,

grab a weapon or the bible, and call the cops---maybe an exorcist---

---not really knowing what else to do with a *demon*.

No. The darkness of the world often finds itself most effective in making its way into your life

through the ill-intended one standing at your door with soft words and a smile, doesn't it?

During the season of the fast, temptation to break out of conversation with God sometimes comes in the form of a glistening chocolate glazed Long John or sweet smelling espresso.

...So no... just like with us, you don't see the "devil" being obvious here, with Jesus.

The devil even uses the word of God from Psalm 91---

---our 2nd reading from the Hebrew Bible---and *twists* the *truth* around,

To tempt Jesus away and push his own agenda---

---To get into Jesus' head, and try to put a stop to his ministry,
before it even has a chance to really start.

Ooo... and that's the darkness of the world, right? Man it can run so deep.

And strikes at the most unexpected of times. ..

Often during the best of times with God, when your guard is down low.

This was Jesus' time of fasting. His time holy of prayer... conversation...

...talking with God, before he started in his mission in the world.

And boom! There it pops up. That darkness---that *temptation* in the desert.

And what happens to Jesus?

Does he fall for it? Does he give in? Does he take the bait?

---Even when *God's* words are being used improperly against his?

No, he stands firm. He passes through.

Because, after all, those words from Psalm 91 that are quoted by the devil here,
are true when left alone to stand in the light of God...

Verses 5-10....

5 You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day, 6 or the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or the destruction that wastes at noonday. 7 A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. 8 You will only look with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked. 9 Because you have made the LORD your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, 10 no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent.

Verses 14-16....

14 Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. 15 When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. 16 With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.

Jesus knew he was okay, regardless of what faced him,

because God protects those who love God. Those who seek God.

For all of you who seek to be in relationship with God---

---in conversation with God---

...Gods always got your back. Just as long as you don't follow that temptation

and that darkness, and break away from the loving hold of God's arms.

So that's the other part of what the lectionary and the wider church

asked us to focus on today.

That's other reason for this season of Lent.

To celebrate that tough forty days in the desert that Jesus faced, and overcame.

And it really is an amazing moment to celebrate.... Because think about it...

if he hadn't withstood what happened out there,

none of us would be sitting in this room here, talking about a thing, right now.

Jesus' ministry never would've happened.

The world never would never have known the love of the Christ.

And what an empty, cold place life would be, without it.

So, as we enter into this holy time with God.

This quiet time with God. This private time with God.

Let's celebrate what we've got. Give back some of those gifts we feel in our lives,

and lift them up to God...

....returning the love we've been given, and feeling it come back again and again,
through each moment of this time leading up to Easter.

Remember God, your constant friend, and enjoy the time, catching up.

As you reach for whatever it is you let become a blank spot in your life
to fill up with an experience of God...

... and you feel that temptation to stop that conversation and push it aside,

Remember those moments with Jesus in the desert,

and celebrate the fact of his beating it, and standing up to talk to us and heal us anyway.

....And always, as we walk this road from Ash Wednesday to Easter,

Let's remember what came to Jesus and to us, at the end of it all.

...A miraculous refreshment of the soul. New life. ...Resurrection.
Amen.